
THE
BROAD RIVER
REVIEW

Volume 47
2015

The Literary Review of Gardner-Webb University
Boiling Springs, North Carolina

THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

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EDITORS' NOTE

Each year, the *Broad River Review* publishes a number of contest winners and select finalists. The Rash Awards in Fiction and Poetry, are named in honor of Ron Rash, a 1976 graduate of Gardner-Webb University. Rash's first published poem, "Last Night Ride," appeared in the pages of this literary review the year of his graduation. Since then, Rash has worked prodigiously to become a prize-winning writer and *New York Times* bestseller. The J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award is awarded to a senior English major or minor at Gardner-Webb University whose poetry is judged most outstanding by a committee of department members.

We would like to thank Daniel Wallace and David Bottoms for serving as judges for the Rash Awards in Fiction and Poetry, respectively. Wallace selected "Useful Things" by Adam Padgett, of Charlotte, North Carolina, for the fiction award, while Bottoms picked "Fiftieth Anniversary" by Sharon Charde, of Lakeville, Connecticut, as winner of the poetry award. Congratulations to both winners, who received \$500 each and publication in the 2015 issue. Wallace said, "I loved every word of 'Useful Things,' which is breathtaking in its brevity and bravery." Bottoms commented, "I love the clean subtlety of 'Fiftieth Anniversary,' the way the poet says so little but suggests so much. There is a lovely economy here. Things are allowed to happen in the white spaces, and the poem allows the reader to participate in the poet's relationship, in these lives trying to make sense of themselves."

We would also like to thank every writer who submitted to us or entered our contests. A full list of honorable mentions and finalists can be found on our website, www.broadriverreview.org. Our next contest submission period will coincide with our regular submission period, which will be September 1–November 15, 2015. Full submission information and guidelines, including profiles of the judges, will appear on our web site in July. We also appreciate our subscribers and those who have donated to us.

Finally, the editors offer sincere appreciation to the Department of English Language and Literature at Gardner-Webb University for its continued support. In addition, the editors would like to thank university administration for its sustained financial backing of a literary review.

SHARON CHARDE

Fiftieth Anniversary

for John

Let's imagine I have
more to write about
than a dead son.

When you say
I am beautiful
I look back

to see who is there.
Your eyes stay kind.

I am who my girlhood
prayed for—

slim legs and hips.
I have you.

What should a woman's
prayers be?

Let's imagine they
were answered.

It's only us,
all these years into it,

two trying to become
themselves.

Let's imagine our bed
a little church,
praying those prayers.

Useful Things

When the second floor of 22 Wallace Place collapsed, it felt as if the entire world had succumbed to a quake. There was wreckage. And, for a time, there was screaming. Marvetta had been sleeping when the crash came of a sudden, after the structure of her home could no longer withstand the weight of all her collected things. She felt no pain until after the confusion of the collapse and then she felt a wrenching in her abdomen and her right shoulder, the feeling of immobilization. Then she screamed, an ameliorant for the blinding pain, much like they say about laughter, holding hands, making love. It'd been nearly a month since Marvetta had talked with anyone aside from those at the grocery store and pharmacy, so she hadn't much hope for a Samaritan stumbling upon her circumstance. She thought that if enough mail piled up, someone might come by to investigate, though this could take days.

She gave screaming another try. In the tight space, her voice rebounded back to her eardrums, amplified in the dark, and when she breathed heavier, her mouth felt moist and hot. She experimented with her range of motion. Fingers on the left side could straighten and scrunch the blanket under which she lay. Her head could only move side-to-side a few inches, maybe. She moved her toes and legs, but couldn't be sure if they actually moved or if it were a phantom sensation, so she stopped and would try again later.

It had been the mess, she decided. It was the mess that collapsed violently upon her. The mess, the profound collection of things. Useless things. Newspapers, prescription bottles, keepsakes. Things. The paperback books, too. The empty bags of bird food. The collection of glass owls gathered from flea markets and antique shops. She thought these not as trash, though a good portion of which was indeed trash. It had, at some point in her life, gotten away from her, irreparably so. For example, there'd been no more room for her stubby paperbacks and so, once her bookshelves filled the bathroom counter and the space around the television, she began to stack them where she had kept the microwave (the microwave, now beside the recliner). Books then fell into the sink so she could no longer clean the dishes. Consequently, Marvetta bought only food you could eat out of its container: cans, TV dinners, potato chips. It'd been easier that way.

The paper still came in the mornings on her front porch. They belonged in the bedroom above hers. There had, at one time, been a punctilious system of order, which fell to disarray in the confusing panoply. Everything had value. For instance, soda bottles could be turned in for a value just as the newspapers could be later referenced or repurposed somehow. The things had value. The things held her together as vestiges of herself that would survive long after she could not.

A dim light emerged, indirect, like a candled drum. She gave screaming another try. Her voice faded again to the strain. Even if the postal carrier had driven to her mailbox just then, she had doubts he would be able to hear over the hum of his truck and through her forested property.

The postal carrier had a little boy, she knew, with a degenerative mitochondrial disease. The boy would die by age ten. One day, he told Marvetta that their son was a blessing. That God had loaned them their son for a few years to teach them about the true meaning of life and love. Marvetta considered his story. She said that invalids and doomed children should be released from their circumstance, otherwise, keeping them alive for so long was just torture. She hadn't spoken to him since.

Marvetta tried moving again, tried to at least push some of the debris that had her pinned to her mattress, but it had not given, not an inch.

Maybe her sister, Gwendolyn, would call. They always said that they'd been born years apart, but sharing one spirit, existing in two bodies at once. They had, before, called the other on a hunch. A hunch that the other was sad or in pain or in distress. Marvetta kept a phone by her bed and thought that if it rang, she could find it, knock it off its receiver and holler for help. The night before, they argued over the phone about attending Uncle Francis's funeral. Marvetta didn't want to. Said the old man was a sonofabitch and didn't deserve a single tear shed over his passing. Said the world was a better place without him. Her sister gave a speech about forgiving and forgetting, although Marvetta told her that she was a crazy-ass just like their uncle and so her sister hung up.

Uncle Francis's obituary appeared in the paper and Marvetta had cut it out and saved it in her Bible because she knew she wouldn't lose it there. The Bible she kept at her bedside now lay somewhere among the wreck. She had read it a few times over, the image of a man, dressed as if he'd taken the picture in preparation for his own funeral: red tie in a Windsor knot pulled to his throat. His smile looked of a mischievous smirk; the kind that turned downward, like a frown. She recalled being a young teenager when Uncle Francis stayed with the family. He stopped her in the hallway once to tell her how pretty she looked and pet her hair and caressed her skin and joked about

how he wished he could marry her but the church wouldn't have it. Fresh from his divorce and infidelity. At the diner table he groped a twelve-year old Marveta's knee through her jeans. He said she smelled pretty. He gave a lascivious wink and a frownish smirk. He stayed in their house for three months.

The orange light of Marveta's tight and limited space allowed a clearer sense of orientation and as the sun rose higher, she could more clearly see the ants upside down along the papers and books that fully occupied her periphery. They marched and scattered and she found herself unperturbed, unbothered by the pests. One crawled along her cheek, down her chin and then someplace where she could not see or feel. It reminded her of fingers. Of a baby's fingers reaching and grasping at air. Opening and closing for what they could not hold onto.

She cared for many babies in her life and often thought that the Lord had placed her on this planet to take care of babies. Other people's babies, not having any of her own. She wiped their asses and watched them grow and leave her, to be replaced by the next. She kept toys. A collection to use and reuse. The plastic rotary phone on wheels that rang when children dragged it across the floor, pulling the thin yellow string. The Russian dolls that stacked, one inside the other. The wooden pieces and parts of a Tinkertoy set. She still had these. In the attic, perhaps. She forgot where exactly. But the tiny fingers she remembered.

If there ever were a time when Marveta wished she had children of her own, now would be the time. She never wanted children and never found a man worthy of her hand in marriage. She didn't need any one to take care of her, she often thought. Although now, she could use a visitor. Her niece, Reality (hippy parents), used to write letters, physical letters. Marveta would read them and take days or weeks to write back. Reality was also upset that her aunt refused to attend family affairs, missing birthdays and reunions. The funeral of an uncle. Upset that Marveta had grown more detached, maybe since Reality married that man, ten years her senior—much too old, Marveta had told her. What business you got sexing with a man of that age? Find one your own age, she'd say.

The married couple came over to her house once. Reality's children had aged a handful of years by then but had not outgrown the need to grab, touch, or put any and everything into their mouths. They would come down and stay, Reality had promised, with her and visit the beach and breath the salty air like she had as a child. But when they came, Marveta's fridge had nearly three inches of black, rotten food that turned to a soggy paste, caking the bottom shelf. The house smelled of cat piss, said Charles, the husband.

Said he wouldn't let his children sleep in filth. He took the children to stay in a hotel. Reality went with them. So when the next letter came, Marvetta read it and tossed it into the trash.

Days later, she unballied the letter, the letter asking if she still visited Carolina Beach and when she planned to leave the coast and come visit the family again. Marvetta finally wrote back, telling her niece that she did see the ocean, that she did see the world outside her home. Marvetta wrote about how she couldn't visit because her heart belonged to the ocean. She read that sentence a few times over, the one about her heart belonging to the ocean. It sounded nice on the page but didn't hold any actual meaning. Her niece's letters stayed in a shoebox. Marvetta couldn't be sure of where, but when she thought real hard about it, she thought that maybe she put them atop a pile of clothes on the washing machine, clothes she meant to take to Goodwill.

A cockroach had crawled by and then away. Wendell the bird squawked a little but was quiet now. His cage must be piling sky high with urine and waste, she thought. Maybe the cat had gotten out. She hoped that maybe he did and that someone would find him, read his collar, and bring him home and rescue her.

The pain had gone away for the most part. If she were to move or shift, it would come back in sharp pulses that shot from her hip and up her spine. So she tried to stay as still as possible. She had given up on summoning that inhuman strength she'd seen on television programs where people find themselves in extraordinary conditions and adrenaline surges to a strength they never knew they had. Women lifting cars to save a baby; a man battling a shark; or a little girl fighting off a captor. She didn't think there was much plausibility in a woman in her sixties lifting the weight of a house.

Something shifted and pressed tighter against her hip and then she let loose a fresh round of screams and moans. She imagined the appearance of her injury if she were able to see it, a grotesquerie she would prefer not to think of, but in the mundaneness of the rubble, when she thought all the thoughts she had to think, she would return to injury and cringe, until she fell asleep, dreaming of walking and moving, a life removed from the pile of things that pinned her indefinitely to her home.

#

When she woke, the dim, peripheral light had gone away. The temperature had dropped considerably.

She thought again of her sister, hoping for the phone to ring. The last she saw her sibling had been during a family reunion, at Christmas time. Marvetta often forgot how large the family had become; she could see

the branches of the family tree sprouting while she moved closer toward its roots. Three of her cousins and their children and grandchildren were there. Marveta's niece, Reality, and her three little children. Uncle Francis, even, and his fourth wife, who was much younger and looked very much like a man: thick hands and a thick Jersey accent. Marveta and her sister, Gwendolyn, sat by an unlit fireplace and gossiped about the woman's orange tan and mannish demeanor. They giggled over wine and made fun of Uncle Francis and his strangenesses. Jokes about stealing his hairpiece. Jokes about the toe he claimed he lost in the war, but everyone knew he lost it beneath a lawnmower.

They drank until very drunk. Marveta talked about how Uncle Francis used to touch her in the hallways during those three months he lived with them as children. Gwendolyn then told about how Uncle Francis entered her bedroom one night and how this older man pulled back her covers and began a sexual relationship that would continue for the subsequent three years. A secret Gwendolyn must have kept to herself all that time, one that finally let loose during that night of heavy holiday drinking. A conversation that caused something to happen, something irreparable. If the sisters grew their whole lives sharing the same spirit, it split just then and the parts separated and would not come back together. Her sister, her older sister, her stranger of a sister. Gwendolyn gave Marveta a Christmas ornament that year, a glass angel with a halo affixed golden above its head. It lay, pristine, boxed in the laundry room closet, nested in a collection of soft white tissue paper.

The phone rang.

The ringing sounded distant. She thought she could see the ringing as pulses of light down a very dark tunnel before she woke to hear the rapid hammering of the bell inside the rotary telephone. It rang several times, only a few surely remained. Marveta struggled, pushed and fidgeted. Some of the papers and boxes atop her moved slightly, but the movement had been very slight. Her right arm could move the most, and so she reached above her head and grabbed what felt like the leg of a table. She shook it and she shook it. The bell rang until it no longer did. She lay there, disappointed, thinking on the phone call and who it could have been. The cable company or telemarketer, she hoped. At least anonymity would have saved her some embarrassment.

The sun returned, at some point, and a dull orange bloomed again through breaks in the debris. She had placed an order for more books and other things on Amazon. The delivery wasn't expected to come for a few more days. Standard shipping. She had ordered new stationery. A new

fountain pen and letter paper. Envelopes and bottles of black ink. She thought that maybe she'd write more. More to her niece. Maybe to her sister. To her father, his headstone, whereupon she'd leave the letter. She'd tell her father about Uncle Francis, his brother—the terrible things he had done. She would write about the condition of her life but would be unlikely to bring herself to write about the truth. The trouble with truth and circumstance is that the truth never speaks fully of the circumstance, she thought. People might say that her circumstance was a result of her own undoing. She never planned to be buried under the weight of all her things. She had not faith in the veracity of the stories that would later be told about her. Who she was, how her circumstance came to be. How circumstances filled her home with debris. With things.

Instead, she would write about more pleasant things. She would write about plans. She would write about a future. She would write about her life and the ocean. She would write about the beach and about how she'd witnessed flakes of snow tumble from miles and miles above only to melt in the salty air just before finally reaching the sand and the earth.

#

Wendell the parakeet sat atop his cage that had fallen to its side and broken open. He had learned to claw onto certain surfaces and to scale mounds of garbage. He attempted flight, but the best he could manage was flapping to soft landings. He found lettuce to eat and half-rotted fruit on which to peck. He'd squawk to himself, finding no one else to listen. The woman stopped screaming, "help," days ago and Wendell repeated the word to himself, keeping his own company. He would sing other things too. "Goddamn it." "Shit." "Pretty bird." "Assholes." "Pretty bird," again. He found a mirror and looked himself over. Something similar hung in his cage. He was all green and yellow-faced. Wendell raised his wings and flapped them at his reflection and then brought his wings back tightly to his sides. He preened himself.

An opening existed, a window broken. Wendell hopped and clawed up a stack of books and greasy frying pans, his digits clacking against the Teflon and an eight of clubs stuck to a pan. He climbed onto the wing of an old wingback chair. A six-inch gap stood before him and the open window. Wendell the bird opened his wings and flapped mightily and landed safe on the sill. The house had been very quiet. The groaning of the broken structure had ended sometime ago. Wendell the bird then leapt from the open window and landed, as soft as he could, to the dirt and tall, limped grass. He walked into the open world, hollering, "Assholes, assholes!" into the sky. "Goddamn

it!" he said. He even hollered, "Help!" for a while. But when the sun neared the horizon and puckered a blood red, he would sing to himself, "Pretty bird, pretty bird." He sang this over and over, finding comfort in the song. He would dream once again of rediscovering flight, and eventually, he would unlearn the inscrutable tongue he had taught himself to speak.

NICOLE SAXTON

Christian Ritual

Honor my request:
Bind my wrists until they are one,
shackle my ankles with chains
married to the iron ball and
weight of my ancestors.

Submerge me in water and leave me be.
Grant the waves permission to invade
until they fill my lungs with death.

Do not come to my rescue.
For my limbs will undoubtedly panic, sway
beneath the pressure of the sea
until the curtains fall.

Raise me gracefully from the sea,
and breathe life into me.

Repeat this necessity daily
till my flesh is no more.
Cleanse my soul from all the sin I indulge,
allow the beauty of simple bones to blossom.

NICOLE SAXTON

Color Blind

Pick a side.

The war between black and white,
unaware of the gray.

Nothing is just black and white.
Neutral is nestled within,
refusing to be caged,
its independence leaks out.

Fear of a different pigment,
life is segregated by race.
They've lost their way inside the spectrum—
we all bleed red.

Love, blind to color.
His black and her white
forms a pearl— their child.
The hues of love, a declaration.

KATHY ACKERMAN

April 19, 1906:

Marie Curie Talks to Pierre on the Night of His Death

You left me this morning in your usual rush.
You were late. I was occupied with the girls.
You wanted only to know when I'd arrive at the lab
but I begged you not to torment me.
I know nothing will torment me more than this,
even knowing the way you died.
Distracted.

Did your umbrella block your view?
You never coped well in rain.
I always suspected it saddened you,
so badly needing light.

I went to see the Percherons who caused your death.
They are lovely. But too young
and unaccustomed
to Paris intersections
and this the busiest one of all,
the Rue Dauphine at Pont Neuf.
The quais we liked to stroll.

I need you to know the driver swerved
to miss you, my love.
But the wagon was heavy and long,
thirty feet of military uniforms
on their way to keep us safe.
The irony is not lost on me—
your brilliant mind
was crushed entirely, instantly
by a wheel at a curb in the rain
encased merely in bone.

Mapping Our Run to The Isle of Skye

Be pleased the tide that filled the harbor
summoned again a surge of travelers.
Between mainland and isle, daytrippers,
late from Armadale forest, hurry to the ferry,
feet rushing through windfall leaves, ticket
stubs, wildflowers flung from a laughing
child; perhaps a love note blown
in the seawind from the hand of the last
passenger to board—someone
who'll never return to the isle, the restless
charm of their words read by no one now.
We mainlanders travel back to bustling
towns, on buses or railcars—our transit
home. Far beyond the fish merchants
of industrial Mallaig to inland skies running
clear between streetlights and high over roofs,
we travel in kinship with all who abide
on land, where we watch the lingering threads
of sunset weave their last songs among us.

KB BALLENTINE

The Color of Longing

blushes outside my window—
a dogwood just bursting into bloom.
Dawn sings us awake and I reach
for your hand in the orange-gold light.
Your breath shallows, and you smile
in your sleep, pale shoulder begging
my lips. *I love you* is so simple
when robins tremble bare bushes
by the porch, and I snug into your warmth.
When your eyes drift open from dreams—
then you whisper her name.

White Light

Tiny caterpillars curl in the hedges
of broccoli tops, navigate their crooks.
Celadon striped, they hang like monkeys
in a miniature canopy.

Weeks ago, white
moths spun over the cabbages. Their offspring
hatch in cups the leaves make as they climb
teal stalks.

Had I grown them for color
I'd have reaped worlds, but who wants curled
infinities on her tongue?

Last week at the
cleaners Denise said she'd come back
three times. Once from an accident in a car,
twice from surgeries for cancer.

I hope
this for the daikon, whose transplants
flatten their leaves as they wilt, but whose
tight icicles fit straight into earth. Permaculture
is what the chic call it. I just want to eat.

She said the angels and god called her back.

A bell rang and a man came up behind me or
I would have asked what she saw, while
she handed over shirts on hangers. Three
times she died.

Called, one way or another,
is what I think, close to the edge of trails
or on the bald's rocks at Rattlesnake
where the wind flaps as if I were inside an
invisible parachute, domed above me, and billows
as if one world is peeling away from another.

I don't want my glasses to fall off.

Blue green

as cabbages, mountains in waves smooth
as a child's drawing. The way you would
trace them if I said, "Draw the Blue Ridge."
Inside the troughs: blues, gray greens mixed in.

I make metaphor out of the infiltration
of caterpillar, as if I should know when cabbage
moths are circling. As if I should know to pick
the heads the minute they become. Before
they are the spoils.

The Sound Transit 594

I watched as the young man boarded the bus, swiped his travel card, and took his place at the head of the crush. Thin and bony, slack-shouldered, too, he wore a Nordic-style knit stocking cap on his head, the kind with tassels hanging from ear flaps, and his hair, though not overly long, stuck out like straw on a corn broom. He carried a chipped and nicked skateboard under one arm, which he stuck in an overhead bin, then he peeled a canvas rucksack from his back and tried to stuff it into the same storage bin, but it wouldn't go, even after several attempts. He gave up and tried to mount the rucksack on his back again but there barely was enough room on the bus to turn around, let alone hoist the heavy bag over his shoulders, so he impassively held it to his chest and steadied himself against the press of other passengers as the bus trundled on. I decided to get up and help the young man.

"Try this," I said as I pulled my old-style attaché case from one of the overhead bins, the kind of flat, stiff case all the ad agency types on "Mad Men" carry. I set it upright on its hinged bottom, and then I asked the young man for his rucksack, which I stuffed between it and a cardboard box nearby.

"There," I said proudly, turning to the young man. I tried to ignore the laconic, even fagged look on his face, a bleary, beat appearance that almost defined him. "You just have to analyze the situation, then come up with a plan. Big things or small, it's all the same in life."

The young man smiled wanly while balancing himself on the bounding bus, but I sensed a snarky, smirking sort of malevolent vapor frothing behind the façade. I wasn't going to challenge him. I just wanted to look at his emerald green eyes, bright even in this brooding, overcast Pacific Northwest sky, and at his wide, thin lips, raspberry red and smooth like melon, innocent, fresh and young. He said nothing; his head rolled on his shoulders like a ship moored at sea, waiting, a calculated delay more than at rest. I clenched my fist lightly and tapped him on his breastplate before turning away.

Once back in my seat on the Sound Transit 594, an afternoon intercity run from Seattle to all points south, I opened my tie at the neck and leaned across the woman in the seat next to me. I smiled curtly as I pinched the releases on the window so I could lift it high, then I smiled at her again as I dropped back into my seat. The bus was stuffy, yes, but breathing could be difficult for me at times like this.

"What was that all about?" the woman asked, looking up momentarily at the boy before back at me, concern in her eyes both for him and my own pallid appearance. "Who is he?"

I looked straight ahead without answering at first, then I took a deep breath and sighed. I suppressed a tear and told myself I had to be brave, and I answered her.

"That's my son," I told her. "He lives in Lakewood. I see him on the bus sometimes."

Antoine, we call him Andy, left home at 17. He didn't finish high school, had turned down early admission to Cal Tech, and wouldn't consider UW-Tacoma at all (we all lived together in Tacoma then). He just wanted to be on his own, he said.

"Fine," I told him, not squeezing him too hard for information, wanting to give him his space.

Andy had always been independent, even a bit edgy. When he was 14 he spent the night alone in the Olympic Mountains, climbed much of Mt. Rainier, too, organizing and planning the trips on his own.

"Lewis and Clark came all the way up the Missouri River and the Columbia River Gorge," I told Andy while he still was in middle school. "You could have been part of that expedition." I took him to the library and we borrowed a couple of books on the expedition. We read them together.

He was the little adventurer, someone who really did listen to the beat of a different drummer, but Melinda never saw anything positive in what he was doing, especially wanting to leave school early. "You've got to stop him," she harangued me when Andy first broached the possibility of dropping out. "He'll ruin his life. It's crazy talk. Stop him."

"*Stop him, stop him, stop him.*" That's how I remember her seeming then. She could be very shrewish.

I did ask, though, why he wanted to leave school, leave home, too. We were seated at our kitchen table, a round oak table my grandparents bought for their wedding that had been passed down, and only a single light was switched on. There was a soft, easy glow in the room.

Andy shrugged. "I don't know," he said somewhat haltingly. "I mean, why not, right?" He looked up at me hopefully, but as if he wasn't sure himself. "It's just, like, I know I don't want to go to college. Not really. I mean, if I go to college, then I'll have to get a job using my degree. Or I'll have to go to graduate school next. But eventually I'll have to get a job, buy a house, maybe marry and raise kids. Then it'll be all over. That's not living. That's dying." He was 17 at the time.

I reached across the table for his hand and clasped it firmly between my two. I remember how relieved I was that he didn't pull away. "Is it something at school we don't know about?" I asked. "You don't have to go to college. There are all kinds of post-secondary options out there. You like cars, don't you? And the military needs smart kids like you. You don't have to tote a gun."

"I just want to start with nothing," he said.

"You want to make your own way," I said. "I completely understand. But start with nothing? What does that even mean? Have you heard of John Donne?"

Melinda blew up when I agreed to help Andy find an apartment in Lakewood but it was a compromise, part of a plan. I didn't want him moving in with drifters, the kinds of kids who hang out at the Greyhound Bus Station or do Hare Krishna chants inside airport terminals. Living on your own could not mean living on the street. He'd have a warm, safe place of his own, and we'd know where to find him.

"You gave in?" she admonished me. "Just like that? What? You moving in with him? Is that it?"

Melinda had stayed home with Andy when he was younger, then she took jobs she thought were beneath her—check-out at Safeway, front desk at a day spa, even telephone newspaper subscription sales. They probably were beneath her—she was not stupid—and she blamed me for forcing her to stay home with Andy when he was younger, forcing her onto the Mommy track. She was so addicted to jealousy and resentment. She felt that if life were fair she wouldn't have to take jobs like that in the first place. I secretly thought she should be more like Andy—if she really didn't like things, then make the change yourself. The world doesn't change for the person.

Melinda was 45 when we divorced. Andy leaving home was the excuse, and maybe she had stayed with me only because of him all along. She got the nice house and I moved into an apartment near Wright Park. We had separated a month after Andy moved out.

Andy let me visit him a few times. I helped him furnish his apartment—one bedroom with a kitchenette, maybe it should have been called a studio—and we went first to Salvation Army and Goodwill but there isn't much good stuff at those places anymore, all chipboard and veneer. We bought some knockdown furniture at Wal-Mart, imported pine pieces from Brazil, and that was much better, then a real chest of drawers and kitchen table from a consignment shop in Puyallup. It was fun helping him set up, and I thought Andy was proud of his place when he was finished furnishing it. For that I was proud of him.

"How's the job search?" I asked after a visit. I had staked him to some money, maybe Melinda had, too, but I didn't think this was welfare I was giving him. He'd worked some fast food jobs, even delivered phone books when he was still in high school, but he was in no hurry to find a regular job, he said.

"I'm looking for a life, not a job," he said.

"Can't argue with that, kid," I said.

But he had a job of sorts, volunteering at a bicycle action project near the University of Washington in Seattle. I worked in Seattle, too; that's why we would meet sometimes on the bus.

I wondered about his friends, what he did at night, why we did nothing more than go to a movie or dinner at a seafood restaurant together. "It's all good," is about all he would say. Or, "I'm getting close." I didn't know what he meant by the latter.

"How is Andy doing?" Melinda asked me over the phone one evening.

"Ask him," I suggested. I wasn't being facetious. I didn't say, "Ask him yourself," which would have been like throwing the question back in her face. I wasn't doing that at all. I just wanted Andy to know he had people who loved him, who cared. She needed to show more interest herself.

"I'm seeing someone," Melinda then said. "I haven't told him I have a son."

It was Melinda who had balked at having a child. That surprised me at first, but informed by the years I was able to look back at the past more critically. We'd met at a Presbyterian church's single mingle night, which is where I thought I'd find respectable, God-fearing, socially conservative people. I worked in the accounting department of a Fortune 500 company and was studying to be a CPA. I wore a suit and tie to work every day, polished brogues on my feet, Penny loafers on weekends.

Melinda had dark, salon-curved hair with maybe a bit too much mousse and she wore too much glossy red lipstick, as well, but it was a single mingle group and we all were trying to impress, right? She stood near the punch bowl holding a clear plastic cup to her mouth, gently swaying to a Harry Connick Jr. record when I approached her. She was a bit frumpish even then—her navy blue dress was cut high on her bosom, just straight across and ending in poufy shoulders at either end, and she wore maroon pumps on her feet that covered her toes and instep. She was not a style leader herself, but I kind of liked the traditional look. She had a wonderful smile—a smile can work wonders—and I thought she was genuinely happy to be asked to dance.

We did fun things on dates like trainspotting from a foot bridge over the Chambers Creek Properties, which is an old gravel pit on Puget Sound that has since been converted to a park. I still like the orange and dark green color scheme of the BNSF locomotives that pass through it on the way to California. In time, after we were married and after Andy was born, we'd all go trainspotting there. I thought Andy loved it, too. He always seemed to study the trains, to gaze at them, his eyes growing wider as they'd approach, sometimes eerily through the morning fog on the Sound. "Wave at the train," I'd tell him and I'd start waving frantically. Andy would wave, too, and sometimes the engineer would blow his whistle.

Basically, I'd wanted a job, a future, and a family growing up. I thought that's what I'd achieved, too. "Hon, I'm making enough money now that we can start a family," I told Melinda during our third year of marriage. We rented at the time. "We can buy a place of our own, maybe a nicer older home in the North End."

I'll always remember her look when I said those words. Dour. It was a dour look. "*Not interested*," it said. Or, perhaps, "*Oh*." It was the kind of response that could make me think, "*Well, don't get too excited*," that is, if I ever got facetious with people.

Melinda and I had family in the area so Andy did not want for doting grandparents and aunts and uncles, or cousins who would play with him just because he was their cousin. Hide-and-seek, building forts in the woods and searching for Indian artifacts—he seemed to enjoy it all.

But as he grew into his teen years the thrills needed to be bigger and scarier all the time, hence Mt. Rainier in the winter, hence bicycle rides in the direction of Spokane until we'd have to come get him.

I next saw Andy on the Sound Transit 594 about two weeks after the day I'd helped him with his rucksack. I boarded at 2nd Street in Seattle, he closer to the architecturally calamitous football and baseball stadiums nearer the Amtrak station south of Downtown. He got on with another young man—this other one toted a guitar case and sported stubbly facial hair—and they seemed to be jovially engaged with each other as they stood at the front of the bus. A passenger had to snake around them to go down the aisle. The bus was not as crowded as the last time and they could have moved a bit closer to the rear themselves, but didn't. I was seated about halfway down the aisle.

What were they talking about? Was Andy really happy just then? Who was this other boy? Those were the thoughts that ran through my mind. I wanted to go up and approach them but I stifled myself. Andy no longer wanted to see me uninvited. He'd call when he wanted to see me. That was

the contract. I had violated it when I helped him stow his gear and we both knew it, but he didn't make a stink. It was understood that I wouldn't do it again, though.

The inter-city bus pulled into my stop near the Tacoma Dome and I decided to exit via the back door; I didn't even turn my head for one last look at my son as I got off. I waited for the bus to pull away, and then I walked to my car in the parking garage and drove home.

There is a good side to Wright Park, one with a conservatory and young people throwing Frisbees, and there is the wrong side, one with men who drink cheap wine from plastic bottles and live in cheap apartments with broken door bells and ripped mailboxes. I lived in the latter, not because I was destitute, but because they gave me a month-to-month lease. I was still considering my options, even a year after the divorce.

When I entered my apartment I dropped my briefcase on the sofa and sat next to it, then I picked up the TV remote and turned on the news. This was much of my routine in the evenings. I'd watch the news, maybe *Jeopardy!*, too, and only then would prepare a modest meal, fry a piece of fish on a skillet and open a can of corn, something like that. In the longer lighted summer evenings I'd take small walks in the park, or stroll along the waterfront at Commencement Bay.

"Why don't you move to Seattle?" a co-worker once asked. "You can afford it." I could. I'd thought about moving to Seattle, if for no other reason than all the time I'd save commuting. There was another reason to think about moving, too. I hadn't dated anyone since the divorce and all the available middle-age women at work were coming on to me. Word was out that I was available. I didn't know it was so easy. Either society had changed in 20 years, or it was getting near closing time at the bar, so to speak. I never was unfaithful to my wife, but I could see sleeping with other women in time. I wasn't against it. And it would certainly be easier to date women in Seattle if I lived in Seattle. So why didn't I move to Seattle?

I just wanted to see my son on the bus, the Sound Transit 594, where I knew I'd bump into him from time to time.

It was a Saturday in May that Andy invited me to visit him in Lakewood and I was excited to come. I hadn't been invited over in weeks. Andy had touched up the place in detail ways—a black and white photo on the wall, correctly matted and framed, showing the 1940 collapse of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, and a color movie poster from *"East of Eden"*—and he had a better table lamp and shade than I'd recalled. I liked the jute rug in the main room, too, a definite improvement over the unvarnished hardwood floor it now covered. I complimented him on all these things.

"How have you been, Andy?" I asked. I sat in an old Morris Chair I'd helped him pick out when he moved in.

"I'm doin' fine," he said. He sounded fine, too. His voice wasn't forced, not anxious in any way.

"So what are you up to?" I continued.

He didn't answer directly, instead apologizing for not offering me something to drink. "Would you like a Coke?" he asked. "I bought some Pomegranate soda at World Market. It's very tart. Would you like that?"

I chose the latter and Andy returned in a minute from the kitchen with two tall glasses filled with this new treat. It proved to be very refreshing and tart, just like Andy said.

"How's the insurance business?" Andy asked as he settled back into his chair. He sat casually but confidently and he peered into my eyes; we both peered into each other's eyes.

"Same old same old," I said. "I know that's not much of a description. I get a bonus this year. They used to give raises but now they just give bonuses. Raises are recurring, so companies don't like them."

"How's Mom?" Andy asked.

I was taken aback. "Have you spoken to her lately?" I countered. I didn't mean it as a challenge.

Andy leaned back in his chair. "She calls," he acknowledged, "but I tell her I'll contact her if I need to talk to anyone. She finally got the hint."

He was speaking pretty cavalierly about his mother and I have to admit I was somewhat gratified. Maybe he knew who the bad guy was in the split after all. I was feeling a bit vindictive, I suppose, but the main thing was for Andy not to blame himself for the divorce.

"So, what's new with you?" I asked, returning to my original query.

Andy told me he had done a lot of thinking about his future, that he was coming close to making some interesting choices. I was excited to hear this.

"That's good," I said. I thought I was speaking in good faith, but Andy admonished me for being patronizing. I wanted to deny the charge, defend myself, but I didn't want anything to become contentious. I told him, "All right. I'm listening."

"Good," he said, as if he'd won the battle, as if there had been the briefest of dust-ups between us.

I studied him in the light that filtered into the room, his face striped by bars of light streaking past the Venetian blinds in his windows, the lines of light on his face like war paint. "*He's a beautiful boy,*" I thought to myself.

Did he remember the first time I took him to the Tacoma Center YMCA basketball camp and he didn't seem to know what to do with the ball when the counselor handed it to him, yet he made a basket in his first attempt? He'd looked down at his hands after the shot, then he turned slowly toward me and smiled. "I knew you could do it," I shouted then.

"So, tell me what you've decided," I said. "It's the story of your life. I think it's a pretty good read."

He chuckled at that, and I smiled in relief. He didn't think I was patronizing him now. "So?" I continued.

"Well, I've been thinking about college, for one thing," he said.

"Yes?" I interjected expectantly.

"Yes, well, I'm definitely not goin'," he said. He paused after that.

"All right," I said. "No one is making you."

"That's right," he said. "No one is making me."

"The military is out, too," he said. "There's a guy lives here, he's stationed at Lewis-McChord. It's not for me. 'Left, right. Left, right,' and all that."

"Well, that's not all they do, I don't think," I said, but I left it at that.

"I've been down to the carpenters' hall and they have classes. It's all paid for and then you get your union card. That's not so bad, I guess. I could learn to build my own house, you know?"

"Working with your hands is great," I said, "and it's working with your head, too. Fitting things, sourcing materials, bidding on jobs. Remember Charlie Wiggins? He was a union carpenter, took only high-end jobs, too."

"Then I went over to the train yard at BNSF. I asked if men still drove spikes into the ground with sledgehammers and one guy told me, 'Sure, we hire rail splitters the first Thursday of each month.'" Andy raised his elbow and pulled it down a couple of times, as if he was yanking a giant air horn. "He was joking. They weren't hiring rail splitters, only mechanics."

I yanked on the imaginary air horn, too, and we both laughed.

"Then there's the Philippine fishing industry," Andy said. "People still go to sea. I could go away for two years, ports of call in places I've only read about. Maybe that's why I was born on the sea."

Now I was concerned.

"And I've read about the diamond mines in South Africa, I've read all about them," he continued. "I could go down in the mines with all the natives and we'd dig with our hands for diamonds, and at night we'd plot rebellion against the slave masters. I'd go native, sort of like the guy in 'Dances With Wolves.' I'd live off of wild boar meat and dead zebra carcasses, you know, just rip the flesh from their bodies. Maybe that's what I'll do. Right now that's my favorite option."

I sighed deeply. I had thought he was being serious. Worse, maybe he thought he was being serious. I looked out the window. I looked for the sun that now fell behind a building on the other side of the street. I looked up toward the sky, still light blue beyond the trees. It was blue, baby blue the sky was. We used to fly a yellow kite against a sky like this, Andy and me. Even Melinda had cheered while seated on a blanket we'd spread on a grassy knoll in the park, reclining on her side, pushing down on her skirt if the wind whipped it up a bit, just a happy family then, me with a happy family and a beautiful boy, Edward Hopper contentedly painting us from behind his sturdy easel.

I had wanted to meet the guitar player since I first saw him on the bus with Andy, but I always was afraid to bring up the prospect. Andy would know what I was thinking—*"What, you don't like it? You think something's wrong?"*—and so I waited. I waited.

I was visiting Andy about a month after the previous visit, sitting in his main room, when I heard the key turn in the lock. We were talking about a movie we'd both seen, albeit separately—"Mud," featuring Matthew McConaughey but starring the Mississippi River, which no one seemed to understand except us—and Andy jumped from his seat and trotted merrily toward the door. I saw the black guitar case but I could not make out the young man's face as his head was bowed and he wore a baseball cap with a Japanese motif or lettering on top, which obscured him further. But it was him, the guitar player, and he leaned his case against the wall next to the door, then he hung up his black motorcycle jacket in the nearby closet.

"I want you to meet Calvin," Andy said, turning with a flourish toward me. "Calvin is in a rock and roll band."

Calvin was about the same height as Andy but more broad-shouldered and muscular. His scruffy facial hair seemed more like a carefully crafted look, like all the GQ and Calvin Klein guys with that just-rolled-out-of-bed-and-didn't-have-time-to-shave look, a standard swaggering appearance for young men these days. But the black motorcycle jacket was cheap and thin, an even more egregious affectation, certainly not the thick leather that a serious rider would wear. I wondered if he could really play the guitar, or if he just strummed a few chords while banging his head in the air. I disliked him immediately.

"Hel-lo Andy's father," Calvin said as he walked over to me, extending his hand theatrically. "Andy has told me so much about you. Well, he's told me almost nothing, but at least he's told me nothing bad. That's good, isn't it?" His laughter at his own joke seemed forced and I chose not to join in, though maybe I just froze.

"Hello," I said rather formally. "Any friend of my son is a friend of mine." Calvin smiled curtly, then turned back to Andy.

"Do we have any whisky, Antoine, dear?" he asked while stepping into the kitchen. "I need a drink. Rehearsals were brutal today. I think we have to fire the bass player. We open in a week-and-a-half and we are in no way, shape or form ready. I cannot go on stage if we are not perfect. Would Jimmy Page? Hmm?"

Calvin already was deep in the kitchen as he continued to speak. I could hear a cabinet door open and slam shut, then I heard Calvin drop a couple of ice cubes into a tumbler. He returned with a short glass tumbler filled with what looked like whisky almost to the top.

Calvin and Andy had met after a show at a small bar in Spanaway. Andy had gone alone and they met after the set, which was a mix of Led Zeppelin covers and original progressive rock tunes Calvin had written. "We're going to be big," Andy assured me. "I'm the manager now, but sometimes I play the tambourine on stage."

I asked Calvin how long he'd been playing an instrument, where he studied and what might his day job might be, if he had one. He just made a face and continued drinking without answering me, but Andy interceded on his behalf.

"I think he's a genius," Andy said. "Well, maybe not. But you have to strive for perfection. That's something you taught me."

I was struck by that concession—"That's something you taught me." The years had not been in vain, yet what was he doing with someone like Calvin. I wondered. I looked closer at this young man. His skin was not that good, ruts and remnants of teen-age acne apparent even on his neck, and I sensed a sleeping malevolence just beneath the surface, a primeval predatory proclivity.

Calvin offered to play a song—it was a few bars from "Kashmir" on his acoustic—and I listened. He assumed the pose—head bowed, spine curved, the air surrounding him weepy with emotion—and he was pretty good, actually. I told him that, too, and added that this might make things tougher on him if his career failed to take off. "The closer you are, the harder it is to let go," I said.

I could see Calvin's head almost explode when I said that. His nostrils flared and his eyes rose up like two full moons and he took a deep breath, then he went into the kitchen and returned with his glass filled with more ice and whisky.

"I know you're right, Andy's dad, the sweet smell of success and all that, to smell it, almost taste it and then not have it, it has to be the hardest

thing," he said, not looking at me as he spoke, but throwing his head back and downing half his drink in one gulp after he spoke.

"Melinda, I think we've lost him," I told my wife a few days after the visit. We were at her lawyer's together to work out some details of our final divorce settlement, mainly how my retirement benefits at work would be divided. The new man in her life—he introduced himself in the outer lobby of the lawyer's office, he had driven Melinda there, he was quite a bit older—kissed her lightly on the cheek, then said he would wait downstairs in a nearby Starbucks. Melinda's lawyer asked if I wanted to consult with my own attorney before signing anything. I told him I'd read everything carefully, that I knew what the score was.

Melinda didn't react too strongly when I said, again, "I think we've lost him."

"Don't worry so much," she told me as she sat on the other side of the walnut conference table in the lawyer's office. Papers were spread out in front of us and the lawyer had his head buried in some of it, ignoring us like he must have ignored hundreds of other couples who were forced to use his services. "It's like you said yourself," she continued. "Everything will work out. And if it doesn't then there really was nothing we could have done about it anyway."

It's been two years since I last saw Andy. I'd gone one more time to his apartment in Lakewood, uninvited that time, and the building superintendent told me both boys had moved out, but separately. He didn't know where they went, but they'd left some furniture that he'd stored in the basement for a month, then he called Goodwill to come and collect it.

I didn't know Calvin's last name but I knew the bar where he sometimes played. "Oh, that band?" the bartender mused. "They broke up. Most do, you know." But the bartender gave me a phone number for the lead singer, a girl who lived in Seattle.

"No, I don't know where they are," the girl told me, "but Calvin likes to use people. He thinks he's all that. I used to date him." Andy had talked about signing up for the Columbia Gorge Job Corps, though, the girl told me. It was another lead and I checked it out, of course, but I came up empty again.

Now, I do little Internet searches for Andy, not just for his name, but for places and activities that I think he might have been drawn to. Maybe I'll see his face in a crowd shot, I tell myself. I just want to see him again; one more time would be enough.

On the other hand, I do see Andy sometimes. I see a young person who boards the Sound Transit 594 on my way home, I can never leave Tacoma now, just anyone who is tall and lanky and relaxed, more so if he's wearing a backpack and carrying a skateboard, and I see Andy. I remember him, I love him, I see him. It's almost like dying a peaceful death and hoping to be reunited in that place called Heaven with a lost loved one and there he is, we're all together again, all is forgiven and forgotten and we're together for ever and ever and ever, all the pain gone now, worth the wait and whatever else it may have been, too.

Payback

Sanders, the Sand Man, was the shooter
on our recon team, the guy we counted on
to take a Victor Charlie's cares away
with a single round. Put him to sleep.
He was methodical, businesslike. Punched in,
did his job, punched out. No regrets.

Which isn't to say he had no fantasies.
Here's one he let us in on. Back in
The World, he would stalk the members
of his draft board, one by one. He'd lay
the cross-hairs like a blessing on a face—
a man's, let's say, taking out the trash,
or a woman's, starting up her car.

Those months of practice, punching in
and punching out, would do the rest.
He'd inhale deeply, release a bit, then
hold steady, his fingertip so wedded
to the trigger that he couldn't tell before
from after. Except there'd be no after,
no bullet smashing bone. Why kill,
he reasoned, if the killing didn't matter,
only the singling-out for death?

We jumped all over him, demanding,
*Not even a note? What's the point, if
they'd never know?* Because he'd let us in,
because the fantasy was ours too.
I would know, the Sand Man said, nodding
as though possessed of esoteric wisdom.
I'd know I'd chosen them this time.

PETER BERGQUIST

The Memories Always Win

I cycle the remote
through the usual channels
and there is *On the Beach*.
The final fallout is coming to Australia;
Greg and Ava are falling for each other.

They check into a cheap country inn
and talk tentatively in their room.
Through the wall, raucous drunks at a bar
are belting out "Waltzing Matilda"
out of tune, very badly indeed.

I'd watched this scene with my mom
many years ago before she died.
She'd pointed out then that,
when the tragic lovers kiss, as they must,
the terrible voices on the soundtrack
slowly meld into a flawless rendition
of the same beautiful song.

I hear it again
and my body cracks in half
and water pours out of my insides
and I drown there on the sofa.

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

Your Story of Water

You move east of Los Angeles
when you're four years old,
and even then something feels off.
Where you came from,
you stomped on the edges of rivers and rain puddles
and watched bugs walk across the skin of water.
The desert was a far-off dream.
When you move in,
you stand in your parents' backyard,
tilt your head back,
and watch the wind blow dust
across your new sky.
Your mother comes up behind you,
jokes that it looks just like the end times.

When you're eight,
your first drought starts,
and the governor tells restaurants
to stop serving water.
Your father takes you up
to the reservoir
to point out the bathtub rings climbing the valley wall.
That night, your mother reads Revelation
out loud after dinner.
She raises her eyebrows specifically at you.

El Nifio years come and go.
When the torrents start,
you ride your bike in the rain,
and imagine your body is a dirty flatland,
your pores sucking up moisture.
You stand on the bridge
over the concrete river
and watch the thirty-foot trench fill

and drain off into the Pacific.
In these years, when you dream of Revelation,
Death rides a white skiff.

When you move to London
at the age of twenty,
the river becomes your fetish.
You come from a city of salt water,
and everything is fresh here.
It flows through the downtown,
and the misting rain is a constant.
You stare at swirling eddies
until your professors
ask if everything is all right.
When you finally have to move back home,
a tiny masochist part of you finds
a relief you don't discuss.

You spend your adulthood trying to move away,
but at cocktail parties and coffee houses
in distant cities,
no one understands you, not really.
They like you
but can tell you're off
even though you don't talk about water.
The drought has moved inside of you
as it has with everyone else in the city.
You carry its lack with you,
the way you carry
your mother's dreams of the end of the world.

SUSAN ELLIOTT BROWN

Ephemeroptera

It's the Fourth of July
and fireworks are about to start by the river.
Attracted by the artificial moons
of streetlamps and headlights, mayflies
swarm inland of the Mississippi, caked
in layers on gas station signs and coloring
everything tan. We swat through the air
thick with wings, watered-down dusk
shadows on the ground. Flies coat the road
and sidewalk, mistaking surface reflections
for the surface of the water, trying to lay
their eggs in the right place and get out
before it's too late. The denim crowd
moves to the banks, blankets in hand,
the Star-Spangled Banner plays
to the percussion of popped thoraxes.

Something Happened This Morning

As soon as I walked into the house, I sensed it: the absence, and the inexplicable presence of someone or something. It was just past eight o'clock on a Monday morning; I was returning from the gym. Sunlight, the teasing kind, October-like and golden, played on the tree tips, the way it usually did when I took my first cup of morning tea, Ceylon or green, gazing out the window. I was looking forward to the first gusty sip. But today, the doors—as I made my way from the garage up through the labyrinth of the mudroom to the main floor—were strangely ajar. The back door, letting out into the rear yard, showed the empty dog pen. No black Scotty, no Gracie in sight. And then, as I made my way up the stairs, slowly, there in the shadows of the kitchen, looking at a pile of my recently clipped recipes, stood Suzanne, quiet as a mouse I might have missed. Stock still she stood, light in shadow, shadow in light, her neat mop of white hair, stylishly undyed, glowing momentarily when I switched on the light.

"Oh, hello," she said, letting a collection of papers drop from her hand to the counter.

Catching her red-handed like that, I felt like I was in the middle of a scene in my very own movie. My senses immediately went on high alert, like they do when I feel like someone has been snooping around, spying on me, trying to uncover my secrets. These days I feel like I am keeping way too many secrets, though I'm not sure why.

"Hello," I said. I could tell I wasn't sounding too friendly.

"The men are outside, talking," she said, stepping away from the pile of papers. "They should be in soon."

I watched her take a brief look around the kitchen. Trying to see what else to focus on, no doubt.

The men. My husband, and Gary, her partner, the boss of our construction company. Not that we're doing anything big or glamorous this time. It's an electrical problem out in the yard they'd come to consult on.

"So what are you doing these days?" she said with her signature smile, so friendly and warm, I began to relax. At that early hour, I thought, for a moment of offering to make her a cup of coffee or something, but I didn't.

What am I doing these days? This is a question that always perplexes me, throws me off, when someone tosses it at me, like a slap intended to bring someone back to real life.

"What are you making? Baking?" she said, as if reading my mind. Or was it some look on my face, giving me away? "I know you're always into something."

Suzanne has always admired my kitchen, the one she and I designed together. "We've done so many high-end kitchens," she has told me often, "but yours is the only one that actually gets used." I always took that as a kind of acknowledgment, some indication of my worth. Being a stay-at-home mom, I was always on the lookout for affirmations.

"These days I'm pretty much into chocolate," I said, surprising myself with my candor. "And candy. Do you like toffee?"

"I love it," she said. Her voice was so gentle and soft, I wondered how she managed it, that even rhythm all the time. "I haven't eaten it in years," she said, just like everyone else to whom I ask the question. And then, once I give them a sample of mine—chocolate-dipped squares of pure crunchy delight—they're completely hooked. I was taking out the box to make up a little packet for her when the men came back into the house, trailed by Gracie.

There was Gary, a picture of health, tall and tan and trimmer than my husband ever would be, but the hand was unmistakably trembling again, maybe even more so, as he attempted several times to put it in his pocket during our conversation about the electrical wiring for the pipe out front.

"So," he said, coming up to the counter where Suzanne and I were transacting our little business. "There are a number of ways we can approach this. We can either go through the garage or come up underneath the front steps..."

That's when I remembered: The last time I had seen him, his hand, the way it had trembled, just enough to cause me to mention it to my husband over dinner that night. Back then, he had waved me off. "*I'm sure it's nothing. Maybe he was just nervous,*" he had said. The same thing he had said before his father's diagnosis of Parkinson's, so many years ago I had almost forgotten the conversation.

Gary, like Suzanne, speaks with a slow, thoughtful cadence, something I could always hear in my mind even after he had left our house. But this time, my husband had noticed it too, his voice a tiny bit slower, and the trembling hand that he tried over and over again to slip into the pocket of his jeans.

After they left, we looked at each other without saying a word, because now both of us knew.

And I was glad I hadn't given Suzanne a hard time about surprising me in the shadows of my kitchen, or peeking through my papers. Glad I had pulled my toffee box out and given her a few pieces for the road ahead.

BOB BUCHANAN

Prisoners of the War He Carries with Him

He was an Air Force officer,
shot down over North Vietnam,
isolated, tortured, eating vermin,
for six horrifying years
a helpless prisoner of war,
locked deep within the Hanoi Hilton.

Years later, at the Air War College,
we shared lunch every day.
Entitled to dine with the other officers,
he insisted we walk an extra half-mile
to the Enlisted Mess Hall,
where you could have
all the ice cream you wanted,
unlike where the officers ate.

He never took more than
a single serving, a small
white brick of plain vanilla,
but he absolutely had to know
he always could have more—
a poignant reminder of his past,
as I watched him reverently
pull back first one side
and then the other of
the frost-covered silver foil.

JOAN COLBY

Vowels

Another conundrum: which came first
Live or love.

Say love engenders
Life (say live). Or live enables
Love. Unless

We substitute two others.
Leave.

Live. Love. Leave.
The question of intent.
The tongue

Springs from the teeth
The way a leaper flies like geese
In the consonant of migration.

But we've forgotten
"u" (you). The second person.

Luv. Not even a word
Although it could mean
Whatever we want it to.

PATTY COLE

He'll Take Us with Him, by God

I can't make my cell phone take pictures, Dad says.
What did he expect?

He was born in 1930—The Great Depression.
There were no cell phones, only cells for those
caught stealing goats and cows.

There was no color, not even a crisp black and white, only
brown sepia painting a flat, still-life.

Now he's pressing the wrong command,
determined not to be a tech-no-phobe
lost in time.

In a moment he's desperate to capture us,
put us in the picture file,
then his casket.

Dad's afraid to let go,
cross over the threshold.

He wants to take the cell phone with him,
tucked in his shirt pocket,
always be in touch.

MICHAEL COLLINS

After High Tide

The tide rose over
its confinement, now

from all of this harbor,
from all of the deeper

waters beyond, a small pool
lingers between the break-

water bricks and the sandy
dirt behind them on land.

A remnant, a remembrance,
a separate thing, already

losing itself, slowly being
absorbed by the new

body who holds it.

Middle Passage

It is night and we are running through the brush. I clutch Sakina's hand, sometimes slowing to match the pace of her short legs and othertimes lifting her in bounds to match my sprint. I hear a dull roar. I cannot tell if it is the sound of the trucks that have spilled us out like the entrails of a knifed-open goat or if it is something else, like the artillery that surrounded my city two years ago, pounding it into millet powder.

I see those who will commit this crime with me, who have paid for their passage with money borrowed from uncles or saved in tins hidden in dirt holes. There are some I'm sure who have sweet-tongued their way by promising they will pay the difference when we reach the far shore. I do not know what the far shore will bring.

I see shadows pause in front of me and my daughter, and we pause too when we come up to them. Before us, the sand and scrawny brush dip down and now the roar is deafening. The sand sinks into water—more water than I have ever seen. This is the ocean that has come to me only in pictures, la mer that is promised to be deeper than the Chari and wider than the bone-dry plains I saw as I rode atop the lorry from Oum-Hadjer to the capital city, sent to N'Djamena to meet my husband. Back then the thrill of new life was with me as it is with me now, but between these times I cannot tell you of the silences and the yelling and the beating.

"Ammi." Sakina tugs at the folds of my dress. "Is this the ocean?"

I click my tongue. "Come, little one. The others are down by the boat." She takes in her breath deeply, and I remember one of the songs she and all her little friends would sing as they play: The ocean, the place where the sun sleeps at night.

On the shore, the beached craft looks larger than it seems, faded blue hull spreading wide in the light of the moon. The waves brush the sand grains against the metal, and the sound is one that makes me want to sleep. Though I do not need anything to make me. My feet are sore from the travelling, walking where no driver would dare pick up a woman with such dark skin as me. And finally, the bus where we were piled in thick, the air festering of sweat and sorrow. The blank faces there, dark faces like mine who had left a life behind in their native countries, verged between waking and sleeping in the gentle hum of the highway. Then the man at the bus stop easy enough to find, or rather who found me.

"Is this your number?" He flashed a white Nokia screen. I muttered that it was. "Follow me." His sallow mouth looked like it was used to saying only what was needed. The unsettling fear I felt then has stayed with me. I've tried to remain concrete-faced when Sakina looks up. But I know I have cracked at moments like this when the sea licks the side of the ship we are to thrust out on.

"The child!" A hand like a tree root appears within inches of my face and beckons for Sakina to be lifted up. I have seen the same hand beckoning me before, the hand of a man who is stronger than I can ever be. The same hand that beckoned me to the wedding bed before I was brushed over by its crevices. And the same hand that thickened and struck. That I came to draw back from even when he only reached for something near me.

I heft Sakina up and she cries out as the salt spray splashes her ankles. She reaches back to me as she is hoisted above. I grip the edge of the boat, try to pull myself up, and feel hands support my feet or push my buttocks until I swing onboard. I do not care anymore for my dignity. The bowels of the ship are even more relentless than the waves. A net that has fished too much, repaired beyond repair. Planks that stretch the width but are warped from seating too many like me, too many who have sought the mystery of the passage over the bleakness of home.

The most dangerous time is the first hour, they whisper. The time it takes to drift away with the tide out into the black of the ocean. The man at the back crouches down with the stick that guides the boat. The motor behind him sputters and purrs, but I know he would not dare turn it up more than he has already. Forty people he has on this boat, thirty-seven he said was the limit. I'm sure a few riyal changed his mind.

Money changes many minds. It changed the mind of the patrolling officer who chose not to appear on the coast as we made our escape. It changed my mind to halt our migration to the north. I had spent my last faded bill to get to Libya with my daughter. I had not expected the drive across the Sahara to be so long, so emptying of my pocket. Two weeks to Faya, the tires burning through sand on the road. Then the weeks of trying to find a path across the desert, twelve of us piled in a Land Cruiser. I remember well the rocky plain we reached and how the rocks would revolve as the car drove over them. We could get out and walk, the truck made no progress. It seemed that we would not meet any other souls but would stay in a never-ending journey until the end of time, or until our water cans emptied. Our food ran short, our tea finished a week in, and the man with the circular glasses

sold us his green leaves at exorbitant prices. The tension the passengers felt between each other boiled like the desert sand at noon.

Then we reached the unsettled regions, where the bandits and rebels had no cause but to simply exist forgotten in the corner of a country. No longer were we anxious with one another, instead we looked out of the windows at the mountainsides and sucked in our breath. The man with the circular glasses shared the rest of his tea with us. We took it beside the car, spreading a mat within a few meters, afraid to go too far. A rock would skitter down the slope and several of us would jump.

And then we reached Bardai, the town with no roofs because rain has not come for some years. It was not as cold as the town's name makes you think, the place of cold. It was night and lanterns lit our way to the night market, to a truckstop restaurant where Sakina and I curled up on a mat on the floor, with other travelers snoring around us. In the morning, I secured passage to Libya with my very last wad of cash, unfolding the bills from a string I had tied across my chest.

"With this money I can only take you an hour past the border," the driver sneered. He looked like he wanted to throw it back in my face.

"Allah-lek, please take my daughter and me there. You will be rewarded in the next life."

"You see," he slapped the side of his vehicle, "a woman should not have brought her daughter across the desert. This is no place for women. This truck could be captured by bandits, you and your daughter raped." I seethed inside but knew he wasn't far from truth. "And what of Libya?" he continued. "We all are going with hopes of work. But what kind of work? We toil digging trenches under the watchful eyes of the overseer. We labor long hours in factories, with the mottos of a proud nation not our own painted in black letters across the walls. And these are stories only told to me by men. But what of women? I don't know because there are no stories."

"Then I will make a new story." But I would not tell him why I made the journey or what I was leaving behind. Any story would be a better one than before.

I feel a nudge. "Hey lady." A black shadowy face hovers over mine. "You don't know how to make a man feel good, do you? Pity this boat doesn't have a bedroom." I scowl at him and pull Sakina to my side. He cannot see my face I am sure, the moonlight not strong enough. So I try to cast the anger into my voice.

"Shut your mouth, or I'll have you thrown over." The still bodies around me suddenly shake with laughter. One by one they speak, their hoarse voices barely drifting over the salt spray and beating waves:

"...Listen to the woman! Telling him off like that."

"Yeah, she doesn't realize I'd want the same thing."

"Are you kidding? Just give me a warm bed that doesn't rock incessantly like this. I'm going to be sick..."

I cannot express the fear that seizes me. Like a limping gazelle surrounded by lions, listening as they each lick their teeth. I did not realize the perils of this journey. To bring my own child into this lion's pit. But to find beauty, gold must first be put through fire. I know that we are closest to safety because this suffering is so strong.

My husband's name was Tahir, and at first, he seemed as innocent as these men around me seemed when we were in the truck, making a break for the coastal sands. But I came to know my husband, the father of my child, for who he really was.

"He's a good man for you," my father told me. Home from school, I fingered a button on my blue uniform. I do not want to travel, that was the first thought that came to my mind. But I have done nothing but travel in the years afterwards, through the land of regret, denial, anger.

Three months after I arrived at his house and the faki performed the ceremony and I had my month of preservation, living behind a calico screen to protect my honor and preserve the marriage bed—Tahir stayed late at work. A good Muslim, everyone had said in Oum Hadjer, before I boarded the lorry to travel to my new life. Really, Tahir would leave from work at the bank with no intention of coming home till late. Meeting his friends, they would go out to the south part of town, the part with the bars and whores, and by the time he arrived home to me, he smelled of sweat and cigarettes. His breath rank with cheap Cameroonian beer. He wanted me and I pushed him away and then he gripped me and that night was a long, long farewell to the delicate joys of unknowing love. Never would I feel the faint respect for him. The trust I had placed in his hands. Those hands left my torso bruised, my cheek purpled. He grew distant, rarely wanting to have anything to do with me.

I was expected to make food, to have steaming moolah prepared for him so that he could eat as he watched television, the Middle East stations blaring on in an Arabic so pure I could barely understand. He'd sooner invite the urchins off the street to partake in his dinner than me. I was expected to bring them more bread when they had run out, glaring at the beggar bowls the boys would leave on the rug, with the mud stains forming a ring on the carpet.

Into this world, I brought Sakina. Her eyes were innocent, unknowing of the pain I felt. The sorrow that filled my heart for nine months as I realized

the predicament into which I was bringing a child. Sakina came to know the nights as I did. I could not bear to look at her if Tahir hit me across the face. When she reached the age of five, and he turned his open palm on her one evening, I realized that I had had enough.

When we were let off the bus at the first town across the Libyan border, I was afraid we'd have to walk the rest of the desert to the sea, the driver jeering at us in the back of my mind. But the question of money was solved the first door I knocked on. We were in a street, villas two or three stories tall. Oasis with grass growing with cement walls. The Abdulhamid family. I asked if they needed some assistance, some help around the house, perhaps a cook.

The woman who greeted me—her round face wrapped in the blackest of fabrics—glanced me over from head to toe. Her light skin, light as the sands, creased around sharp eyes. Lines that were not unfamiliar to kindness, but lines that nonetheless preferred numbers and books to laughter. “We have been in need of a househelp for some time... We can take you on for a week, see how you perform your duties.” Her voice never changed its tone, never drifted down to warmth, concern, interest. Sakina and I were given a small room adjacent to the guard shack where we heard the guard’s incessant radio blare through the night.

The work was easy enough, peeling potatoes through the morning, sweeping the tiles in the main house. I rarely saw my employers. The husband drove a Lexus to work, something that required him to be gone days on end—probably to Tripoli. The wife was content to stay in her second floor bedroom with the television on. Sometimes, a friend or two—women with arms dangling gold bracelets brought from Dubai—would come and they would sit in the living room on the cushions, pouring glass after glass of tea into her favorite demitasse cups and gossiping about the town’s elite who were probably gossiping about them.

For weeks, we lived like this: Sakina confined to the small room and me working from dawn till dusk with the duties of such a pristine house. But then it began to wear on me, the hours and the silence. Never once was I thanked. Only a flash of a smile from the woman. Those were lucky days. Usually I was assigned the very next task to perform if I had completed one of my duties. I began to feel not human, a plate of glass looked through but never looked at.

When I brought the woman her tea one day, it all fell apart. I tripped on a corner of the rug, her crystalline cups falling to the tiles and shattering like tear drops. The tea pot rushed across the rug’s surface, and my mistress

screamed because some had lapped at her ankle, the flesh scalding for a second. I rushed to bring cold water to sprinkle on her burn. A rag to dry up the spilt tea across the floor. A broom to sweep the shards. But the damage was irreversible.

Sakina and I were told to leave in the morning. I was handed an envelope with bills that were clean and crisp. I counted and knew that I had been short-handed by some amount. I knew she would shrug if I asked her. It was her way of reminding me the damage I had done: a spoiled carpet, reddened skin, a tea set completely destroyed.

This would be the money to get us to the sea and then beyond. I knew this much because Ahmed, the guard, whispered to us on the way out, handing me an old cell phone. "I've phoned a friend in Tripoli. When you get there, give him a call. He will take you under his wing. He knows a way out of this place. Your rate will be reduced because he is a friend. But you will have to promise him the world to pay for the passage."

"Ammi." Sakina's voice is soft like the sound of feet walking across sand. "Mother, I do not feel well." I lean down, cup her face in my hands, and peer into eyes that are wide open, eyes dilated for fear of the shadows standing around us. Her skin is hot. I can see her neck pulsating with the blood that flows just under the surface.

"I will get you some water—" I turn and call out. The shadows are reluctant to move, and the man at the helm hisses at me. But then a white jerry can that was used for motor oil comes from hand to hand to mine and I uncup it and see the clear liquid inside. Sakina weakly sips as I tilt the jug up. She forces the can away, and I see a new look in her eyes and I know this is a problem. The man next to us grumbles at the water Sakina let spill, but I ignore him and set down the can and lift Sakina up until her face is over the side of the boat. Every sinew of her abdomen contracts, and I feel her body shudder as she opens her mouth and spills the stale bread and fish of dinner into the sea. When she is done and her head lulls down, I bring her to rest on my chest and hold her tightly, though her legs are long and body hard to balance, the boat floor rocks so much.

"Look what you did!" The water can has fallen on its side and one shadow curses. "If your daughter keeps getting sick, we will throw the both of you overboard."

Another man chuckles, "This is why they should never have agreed to take on a woman... and a child, for that matter. Always bad news for a difficult journey like this."

I close my eyes and hug Sakina closer than before. I cup my hand over her exposed ear so that she will not hear the talking men. I feel her

breathing slow and her head grow heavy, and I am content she has fallen asleep. Time seems to tick by with every beating wave, with the ebb and flow of the weary heads around me. We seem to draw close, shoulder to shoulder, and nod off to sleep, our frames somehow supporting one another. The men around me have lost interest in me, but I still am wary, though my body gives in to make contact with the others. I can think only of Sakina, Sakina. How she will go to school. How she will have friends who are dark and white and in between. How I will work the basest job for her—I no longer have the illusion of sitting at a desk and answering a phone. I know it will be the work of sweat and bending down. Cleaning the homes of the wealthy, manning an assembly line of canned food, scraping dirty floors in office buildings—I do not care, only that Sakina does not know the fists of her father. The shouts that shake the tea glasses in the armoire.

"There it is, there it is!" The cry starts as a hush and then carries until every man is muttering it with his lips. The sky has become painted gray and rimmed with a rainbow of deep blue fire, the fire of the dawning sun. But as I strain my neck to see over the lip of the boat, I know they see something else. They see the island, Lampedusa, the soil that will set us free from a thousand stories of woe. Stories of failed dreams and failed aspirations, of familiar misunderstandings and abuses, of the weight of others placed on our shoulders and yet with no means to pull through.

I see the shadows spread their lips and flash ivory teeth in the sun. They do not seem as sinister as they did at night, these men who share space with me and with Sakina. First one and then the other, looks at me and smiles, and then turns to laugh in the face of a comrade and then in the next. They embrace one another, embrace me, shake the hand of my little girl. The man at the back has quit his hissing. He still scans the waters, scans for the policing ships.

A motor not our own pulls alongside of us. There is the flag of green, white, and red, and men in uniforms, their skin tanned from the sun like animal hide, stare down at our huddled faces. The man who looks in charge holds a large plastic thing up to his mouth, like a funnel or a bucket, and his voice becomes loud. He speaks in several languages, his French slurred so that I only understand a few words and his Arabic so accented that all of us in the boat laugh and cause it to rock back and forth more than just the waves.

We are to disembark. To form a line. To wait. That is all I understand.

Our boat comes into the shallows of the island, and I feel the sand scrape the bottom of the metal underneath my feet. Each of us jump into the water below. Sakina laughs and splashes the clear surface. We file onto the beach, dripping as the sun rises to dry us and warm our hearts.

There are more white soldiers around us, and they guide us along a path that winds around rocks and the side of a building with faded cream paint. We pass the corner and then we see all that have come before us, the lines of men and women, mostly men, snaking across the sand and rock. Heads hung low as the sun's rays become stronger. Skin colored in shades from dark to light beginning to peel. There are tables and more white men and paperwork and stamps and people with red vests showing concern and bringing water bottles and that is all.

Men and women lying on the rocks, huddled under the trees, staring forlornly at the lines, at the lands they have left behind, and toward the continent that will let them in: this reluctant uncle, hesitant step-mother. I hold Sakina close and realize the extent of what we have undertaken. The sand, the sea, and now the people like us—we are too many to be welcomed, too many to ever find a square space of peace, a place in which to close our eyes and whisper, "Home."

Fourth Measurement on a Thursday

I am a tree waiting for winter
with my arms bare and up.
It will hurt.
My skin will tighten and crack.

And so what if I want to stay inside
become a window, my feet up on the sill,
sipping hot cocoa for a whole season; so what
if I want to watch my breath push itself out
and then settle, nonexistence, into the air.
The rest of everything keeps happening,
and I can call my mother when spring comes,
still love something.

BARBARA CONRAD

Sunset at Six Stories

A mountain town's historic basilica
 in shadow, its double-domed
crosses. Flags fluttering
on a county courthouse lawn.
 Walls of warehouse-boutiques
swabbed in amber spatter
like graffiti on old brick
 as owners scurry to their cars,
bodies bent against the season's first bluster.
Six floors up in a polished condo, a man
 reclines on a sofa. He doesn't see
the hard line of light and dark
along a cloud-train chugging across
 a sky turned plum or two black crows
braced on a lamp post in a parking deck.
His wife of forty years, the woman
 he would have grown old with,
is dead, a new one pressing next to him.
Maples on a distant hill are grasping their last
leaves,
 a random beam of sun burning
a hole through the clouds. Man
on a sofa six floors up, wife dead,
 new woman pressing next to him,
his fingers twisted in her hair,
her impulse to rise,
 move to the desk by the window,
begin to write these words.

CAROLINE COTTOM

Welcome the Years

The years knock on the door on schedule.
We let them in
whether it's convenient or not.

They carry a suitcase full of surprises
but they don't show us what they've brought
until they are good and ready.

The years settle into our favorite chair,
plop muddy boots on our hassock,
but what are we to do?

Sometimes they sneak around the house
so quiet we forget their presence.
The shutters don't even shudder.

Sometimes they crash down the stairs
and land in the potted geraniums
then pad away without apology.

The moment we least expect it
the years are waiting in the mirror.
They resemble our mother.

We may dress up the years,
pat their cheeks with makeup,
but we cannot hide the wrinkles.

Their passing is inevitable;
we dab our eyes with tissues,
then celebrate their leaving.

When a year is gone,
its unspent wishes
cut capers in the closet.

If we know what's good for us,
we will clean house.

DONNA L. EMERSON

Beside Salmon Creek

I walk the narrow path beside Salmon Creek.
Pass the great egrets fishing at low tide,
only their toe tips covered by diminishing water.
Spy the human couple beyond the birds, turning their
paddles in the same direction, one behind
the other, one in a red kayak, one in a blue.

A flock of small waterbirds land in the rushes
next to me. Their wing-spread flutter
causes a rushing of air, a silent landing on stalks,
some green and living, some brown and stiff, while
the swaying canes make music, each note one
third above the next.

Such lovely clacking that I must stop
walking and stand among them, until intermission,
across from the fully ripened blackberries, fragrant
wild sweet peas that wind upward, toward
the empty wooden houses above.

Home-Fires

Though your beds are far away / They dream of home

—Lena Gilbert Ford, "Keep the Home Fires Burning"

I don't think Uncle Crane saw much difference between my dad and me. I was just a little piece of his brother-in-law that got picked up from Kentucky and dropped in his house in Michigan.

"He should've thought about it before he did what he did," Uncle Crane said.

"Who? Kendall?" Aunt Flora said. I'm Kendall.

"No, not Kendall. Jim," he said. My dad's called Jim.

I heard every word of their arguments in that house. The ducts carried everything above a whisper through the whole place.

"What on earth does that have to do with Kendall? That child's been through hell. First his mother, now this. Least we can do's make things a little easier on him. That's our part in this."

"He has a part in this too. Nobody said it'd be easy."

"I'm sorry, Crane Taylor, but that has to be the dumbest thing I ever heard. That child's eleven years old."

When they fought, it chilled me through—the same way it did when my dad got into it with strangers. When I stopped to tremble and listen to the rows, my two younger cousins, Hannah and Trevor, looked at me like I had horns, then went on playing.

The thing is, I did have a part in it. My old bus driver, Mr. Swanger, was a nice man, and my dad killed him because I had to go and bellyache. What did I think would happen? Nothing good. So as far as I could tell, Uncle Crane was right.

#

"Who don't like your shoes?" my dad had asked me. He had an envelope from the mailbox in his hands he'd twisted up like a piece of white licorice with some words on it.

"Just some boys."

"What boys?"

"Some boys on the bus." I dropped my head. "Middle schoolers."

His mouth puckered like the edges of a healing scab. His biceps tightened, and the tattoo of my baby picture on his right glowed off it extra good. I hated that tattoo—because who wants to see a picture of his baby self

every time his dad rolls up his sleeves? And I hated when my dad's mouth got like that, because nothing good ever came of that either.

"I bought you them shoes. There ain't nothing wrong with them shoes. You love them shoes."

He was right. I did love my shoes—before I got made fun of, anyway. Shoe Town had these sale racks divided up in sections marked with cut-out construction paper rectangles and magic marker numbers. It seemed like our lucky day when we found those shiny black Nikes in my size. They didn't look a thing in the world like tap shoes to me, even though those boys on the bus later said they did.

My dad was real excited before we went shopping because he had enough money to get me some new school shoes and go to Red Lobster all in the same night. There was nothing in the world he liked better—except maybe fishing—than those cheese biscuits they serve at Red Lobster and what all he got with them, which was always cold beer and the golden fried Admiral's Feast.

Even though my shoes were on sale, they cost way more than my dad budgeted. He tried to flirt a discount out of the sales lady, but she was having none of it. He paid the price they were marked and told me the lady was probably a slit licker loud enough for her to hear. She tossed his change on the counter and pushed the bagged shoes hard onto the floor. My dad's arms went to flexing, and his mouth scabbled up. Baby tat me scowled off his arm. My dad said, "Hey, little girl," with the sound he got when someone in another car drove bad, but I grabbed the box of shoes and pulled hard on his arm, and he didn't do anything except kick hell out of the glass door on the way out.

We stopped at the Gulf station and got roller hot dogs, a box of chocolate doughnuts, and a twelve pack of Bud Light. "It ain't Red Lobster, but maybe we can catch us some seafood at the lake tomorrow," my dad said as he rummaged through the bag for a hot dog. He pulled one out, rolled back the white wrapper, took a bite and chewed it. He gave it a sideways look and said, "Nasty," before taking another bite. He dropped the bag in my lap, said, "Get you one," scrubbed the back of my head with his free hand.

#

I only had one picture of my mom. My dad told me he was so upset after she died, he burned every other one in a fire. "I'm just glad I missed this one so you could have it. I shouldn't have never done that, but I wasn't in my right mind."

I took the framed 5x7 with me to Aunt Flora and Uncle Crane's. I kept it in a drawer. One day, Trevor saw me looking at it, so he asked me who it was.

"It's my mom. She died when I was real little."

"How come she died?"

"She was a firefighter. She was rescuing little kids from a burning house."

Trevor looked at me with his mouth open and said, "Nuh-uh."

"It's true. She saved five little kids. She was a hero."

I stood there looking at her and feeling proud. I pictured her running out of the house with babies under her arm, then going back in for more like my dad said she did. I thought about that all the time, and it made me sad and it made me feel good all at once. Grownups always got quiet when I told that story.

The next night, I was sitting on the floor arranging a platoon of plastic army men when Trevor came in our room smirking. "Your mom didn't get killed in any fire."

"She did so," I said. "My dad told me."

"Well, your dad's a liar, because my dad said she put a pillow over your face and tried to kill you when you were a baby, then she ran off."

I popped to my feet with clenched fists. "You're lying."

"I am not. He said that picture isn't even her. He doesn't know who it is. He said nobody tells you because they feel sorry for you. He said I wasn't supposed to tell you either."

The skin under my eyes started twitching. I called Trevor bastard and didn't stop beating him until Aunt Flora came and pulled me off, and even though she talked to me real loud after, I just balled up and cried with the little army men underneath me poking my side. When I finally came around I told her what Trevor said, and her eyes got real big, then she beat him too. Uncle Crane came in, pulled her off, and dragged her out with her screaming at him and clawing at his arms. A minute later he came in and he beat Trevor.

After Uncle Crane was done with him, Trevor ran off with his face buried in the bend of his arm. Uncle Crane stood looking down on me rubbing the gray-turning stubble on his chin. Then he picked up the picture of my mother and brought it over.

"That's your mother," he said. "Trevor's lying. She was a firefighter, and she died saving little kids."

I didn't say anything, I just looked at him standing there holding my picture.

He reached down and shook my leg. "Okay?"

I nodded.

He held out the picture to me, and I took it. "It was on the news and everything. I saw it."

I rubbed real hard on one of my earlobes, I don't know why, but I did that sometimes. I said, "How many?"

His face wrinkled up. "How many? How many what?"

"How many kids?"

He shrugged his shoulders and raised one of his hands beside his head. "Oh, hell, I don't remember. I guess it was like, two or three."

He stood there like he expected something, but I didn't say anything. I stared at a patch on his shirt. It had the name of the place he worked on it with Crane stitched under it.

"I don't know, Kendall, it was a long time ago. I could be wrong. I'm not real good with that sort of thing." He studied me. After a little bit, he stopped looking at me but didn't go anywhere. He stayed another minute tapping his foot like he was waiting for the toaster, then went out.

When I looked at my mom in that picture, I tried to see it like I always did: her in her big black and yellow firefighter uniform with a mask on running down the front steps out of a burning house with those babies. I'd seen it in my head a thousand times before. Then what I saw was her putting a pillow to baby me's face, the face on my dad's arm. I knew what I looked like because of that tattoo, but she was fuzzy now. I tried switching back to the house fire, but when I tried to see it, I saw the pillow thing too.

My aunt's voice came ringing through the ducts. I heard Uncle Crane some, but mostly it was her.

#

The day Mr. Swanger got killed, I didn't even know my dad got on the bus until I heard the driver's voice shouting and everyone stood up to look and their eyes were popped. My dad was plowing down the aisle when I turned. He said, "Which boys was it, Kendall?" and looked all over the place, like he'd know 'em if he saw 'em.

Mr. Swanger was kind of old, but he was a big man, and he had that big belly he rested his arm on every time someone got on and off the bus. On my way in he always said, "Morning, Kendall," and when I got off it was, "Be good, now." He said that to everybody, except he didn't call them all Kendall.

Mr. Swanger was slower getting down the aisle than my dad, and all the way down he hollered, "You have to get off this bus. You can't be on here."

When my dad got to me he knelt down in my face. His nostrils were big as dimes. "Who was it made fun of your shoes, Kendall? Point 'em out to me."

I didn't say one thing. I knew how bad it was he was on there—even if he didn't—and all I wanted was for him to get back off. What I really wanted was for him to never get on there in the first place, but it was too late for that.

Mr. Swanger put his hand on my dad's shoulder and said, "You can't be on here," like my dad hadn't heard him the first eight times.

My dad knocked his hand away and said, "You get the hell off me," and turned so I could see little baby me on his arm. Little baby me looked like he wasn't too sure about things either.

That was when Mr. Swanger grabbed my dad around the neck, and he about disappeared under the thick old bus driver. It didn't matter that Mr. Swanger was bigger because I knew my dad would try to fight a grizzly bear if that grizzly bear said the wrong thing.

My dad got Mr. Swanger behind the knees and he went over backward in the aisle and my dad flipped over him on his back. He wound up sitting on Mr. Swanger's chest with his back to me. Then he grabbed two seats and pulled himself up on the other side of Mr. Swanger. My dad pointed down at him and said, "You stay the hell off me, you fat bastard."

Mr. Swanger didn't get up, and my dad stood there glaring around at the kids. That was when I wondered if he even remembered why he'd got on that bus in the first place. All the kids who jockeyed to get a look earlier were huddled back in their seats as far as they could get from my dad. A lot of the younger ones had started crying. Some of the older kids near the front ran out.

Mr. Swanger's left arm was up in the air twitching, and he grabbed at his armpit with his other hand. Both his eyes were shut tight, and his teeth all showed. He didn't die from his heart attack until later on, but I guess he had started to then. The police had my dad in one of their cars before the paramedics got Mr. Swanger in the ambulance. When they loaded my dad in the back, he didn't even fight. I guess by then he knew.

After my dad was gone, a policewoman who smelled like cigarettes asked me some questions. She tried to be nice, but I honestly can't remember a single thing she said or what I said back. When I think about talking to that lady, it's like watching TV with the sound off. The volume didn't come back on until she led me to her car and opened the front passenger door. "You're going to ride up front with me, okay, honey."

I looked in at her CB radio and a lot of papers, but I didn't get in. Then I looked at the policewoman again.

She smiled at me. "Go on, honey. It's okay."

I shook my head.

She put her hand on her hip, frowned, and cocked her head. "We've got to go now. You're not in any trouble, but I've got to get you to the station."

I pointed at the back.

"You don't want to ride back there, honey. It's nasty back there. I'd hate to tell you what all's gone on back there."

My eyes went to the ground and I took a deep breath. "I don't care."

Now she took a deep breath. She patted one hand on her hip and screwed up her mouth. "Well, suit yourself."

She unlocked the back door, let me in, then closed it with a definitive thud. The glass between the front seat and me had a panel in it that slid like the order window at Tasty Twist, and it was open. I stared through that gap out the front window during the ride, and I didn't much like being in that police car, or anything else that had happened all that morning. The back seat smelled like the bathroom after my dad used it, and everything I touched was sticky as the top of a honey bottle, but I was glad not to be in that front seat with her. I was glad I didn't wind up someplace I didn't belong.

#

My dad wrote me long letters from prison. After the "Dear Kendall" part, they all started with "Greetings from La Grange, Kentucky". I hadn't seen him write a single letter my whole life, but once he was in prison, he wrote me one about every week. They were easy to spot because he always drew pictures and designs on the outsides of the envelopes. The lined paper on the inside was pretty much filled up with pencil writing, too.

His first few letters were a lot of apologies for what he'd done, and lots of question about how I was doing up in Michigan. He said he missed me awful, but he knew Aunt Flora would take good care of me and that I was in a good place. He always talked about "counting the days" and that even though he'd gotten ten years, he'd be out a lot sooner and I could come home again.

I sent letters back telling Dad how things were good—even though a bunch of kids who talked through their noses made fun of how I talked—and I missed him, too. I addressed the envelopes myself and even put his inmate number on them. I drew little pictures for him on the outside because I figured if he liked to draw them for me he might like to get some back.

After a few months, my dad switched from all the apologizing and questions, and he started in on all we'd do once he was out. Most of what he could come up with was fishing, and buying me a car we could fix up. He had it in his head that I wanted a Mustang, but I didn't. He was the one who liked Mustangs. I always told him it all sounded real good.

After what Trevor said, I wrote my dad a letter, and I asked him the question I wanted answered: "What really happened to my mom?" The next letter I got back didn't have any drawings on it, just my name, and Uncle Crane and Aunt Flora's address, and a stamp. He said Aunt Flora had promised to bring me down to Kentucky to visit him, and when she did, we would talk about things, but that everything he ever told me was true.

I liked reading that, but I wanted to hear it told to me from his mouth. I hadn't seen my dad in months. The day Mr. Swanger died, I stayed the night with my best friend Jayden. After Aunt Flora got there, she stayed with me at our house a few days. She took me to see my dad at the jail twice, and we cried a whole lot, but he said he was going to plead guilty the first chance he got, and I should get on to Michigan and get back in school, so we packed up everything of mine Aunt Flora's car could hold, and I hadn't been back home to Kentucky since. After we were gone, he pled guilty and got his sentence. They moved him from the local jail in town to the big prison in La Grange: the Kentucky State Reformatory.

#

The ride to the prison was just Aunt Flora and me. We had to get up really early, and it took longer than a school day, but it wasn't so bad. My dad had told me a hundred stories about his growing up, but Aunt Flora told me some I'd never heard.

"Your dad used to pick at me, but watch out if anyone else did. And I was the big sister. I remember coming in from a date crying—and it was over nothing. I was seventeen and your dad would've been—let me think." She squinted one eye and looked up at the top of her windshield. "It was summer, so I guess he'd have been fourteen. Anyway, before I knew what happened, he was in the driveway hitting my boyfriend's car with a shovel. Oh, he was mad."

"My dad?"

"He was, yeah, but my boyfriend was madder. I thought he was going to kill your dad, and if he hadn't had that shovel, that boy might have. Your dad scratched that car's paint to pieces. I dated that boy another couple months, but every time he picked me up or dropped me off, he told me to keep your dad away. He wouldn't even pull in the driveway."

I dropped my head. "My dad likes to fight, doesn't he?"

Aunt Flora breathed in deep through her nose and let it back out. "I don't know, Kendall. I'm not sure if he likes it, or he just can't help himself. He comes by it honest. He's been that way always. From the time he was two years old. When he got frustrated, his face went red, and he'd kick and punch anything in reach. You see where it's got him."

I scratched a thin spot in the knee of my jeans, but didn't say anything.

"He loves you, and he loves me, and he loved your mother. He'd have gone down swinging for any one of us. And even though we know that's bad, and we know he shouldn't, we know he loves us. Maybe we can both just hope this changes him. You don't have to hurt anyone to show your love, Kendall. You know that, don't you?"

I nodded without looking up. "I'm sorry I hit Trevor."

She breathed that same way with her nose again. "I am too, Kendall" she said. "I hate it." She reached for my hand and took it. "Let's you and me not do it again, okay? It's no good." She squeezed my hand harder then. I thought about it a moment, then I squeezed hers back. I felt her eyes on me then. "Okay," she said.

Even though she talked to me about my dad, Aunt Flora wouldn't tell me anything about my mom. She said that was for me and him.

When we went across the bridge over the dirty river from Ohio and I saw the Kentucky sign, my heart rose up. Miles further on, Aunt Flora took the turn toward Louisville, and I knew this was no trip home at all, and I got lower than I'd been high. I had to remind myself I would see dad soon, and I was little better then.

I guess I thought a town with a prison in it would be different from a regular town, but it really wasn't. In La Grange we passed banks, a KFC, a local Mexican place like in every other town in Kentucky, churches, and a school that looked like one you'd see anywhere.

When we got near the prison, there wasn't anything around. Then I saw it sticking up out of nowhere, surrounded by high fences with razor wire that looked like stretched out Shinkys. The thing I couldn't get my eyes off was the tall stone tower at the center of it all. It seemed real serious and scary until I thought of what it looked like, which was a big wiener made of Legos.

We didn't go in the Lego wiener part. I followed Aunt Flora and we went in through a side door, and there were a lot of people there waiting just like us, trying to do the same thing we were. Some of them looked nervous, but a lot of them acted like they were waiting to get in a high school football game, or a Chuck E. Cheese, or something. Kids pushing and acting stupid and the adults talking like they weren't even in a prison at all.

When we finally got to the front of the line, and Aunt Flora gave our names and started to sign in, the man in the uniform got a funny look and said, "I'm going to have to ask you to wait here a minute."

Another man showed up, and he didn't have a uniform on. He had a white shirt and a tie and a big name tag with his picture and a bar

code on it in a plastic sleeve that hung from his neck. When he got to the man in the uniform who had told us to wait, that man pointed at us, and the man in the tie with the name tag came over. "Are you Flora Taylor?" he asked Aunt Flora.

"Is something wrong?"

"I need to speak with you a moment. Do you think the young man could wait here while we have a word?"

Aunt Flora said, "No, he couldn't. We're in a prison. He goes where I go."

The man looked down at me, made a noise that sounded like, "hmm," then said, "Follow me, then," and started walking.

Aunt Flora's voice was up when she said to his back, "What's happened?"

He didn't say anything until we were in a small room with a metal door, table, and chairs. He sat down and said, "You should have a seat."

Aunt Flora stood with her arms crossed.

He held his hand out to a chair on the other side of the table from where he was and said, "Please."

She finally did, and instead of getting in another chair, I stood and pressed against her with my head on hers. That was when I heard that she had started crying.

You're here to see James Singleton. Is that correct?"

Aunt Flora nodded.

"I regret to have to tell you, but Mr. Singleton was transported to the hospital this morning. He was involved in a fight, and I'm afraid his injuries were too serious for our infirmary." The man squeezed the tip of his left index finger. "I'm sorry, but that's all the information I have."

"That's it? You can't tell us any more than that?"

"Ma'am," he said, "I honestly don't know any more than that, other than the address of the hospital. Because he remains an inmate of this facility, you may not be able to see him."

I closed my eyes and turned my face into the side of Aunt Flora's head, and I thought her shampoo smelled like maraschino cherries, and I was so sad and scared I wanted to die. She squeezed me to her.

The man in the tie with the name tag said again, "I'm sorry."

#

Aunt Flora ran Uncle Crane off for a couple years, but now he's back. My car came with him. I drop Hannah off at the middle school every day, then Trevor and I go on to the high school. Sometimes, when

I look at the buses lined up, I think about my dad, and sometimes I don't at all.

My dad never could walk or talk again after what happened to him at La Grange. The three men who did it got convicted, and had to serve a little more time, but what difference did that make? They kept my dad in a coma at the hospital three weeks, and had to split his skull because his brain swelled so big. There's a scar on his head that looks like a motorcycle trail through grass. He lived, but he's not hardly around really. Sometimes, when I get to see him, he shakes hard in his chair and his eyes water, but he doesn't do anything but grunt. My little baby face looks so pitiful on his saggy, skinny arm. I love him so much, I wish he was dead.

We stayed two days in Kentucky after he got beat, and they let us get a look at him one time, and that was it. We could hardly see his face through the breathing mask and all the tubes and wires. He looked like one of those premature drug babies you see on TV in a public service ad.

On the way back to Michigan, I felt like I got thrown in a river and was washing away to nowhere. We rode, and I looked out the window, but I didn't see anything. I just floated. It was during that ride when Aunt Flora asked me did I want her to tell me about my mom. I didn't say anything at all for a long time, and neither did she.

Finally, I said, "No," and Aunt Flora never mentioned it again.

When I first went to Aunt Flora and Uncle Crane's, I thought all the time about when I would go home with my dad. After we came back from the trip to Kentucky, I didn't think about it anymore.

After the trip, I started wandering. I wandered the streets, I wandered the woods, I wandered playgrounds. I wandered into stores and walked around until security made me leave. I scared Aunt Flora to death, but it didn't stop me.

At first I kept to myself, but then I saw the same kids who were always out like me, and after a certain number of times we would talk, and then some of them were my friends. They asked me why I was in Michigan. Why I stayed with my aunt. I explained about the deaths of my parents. My mom in a fire. My dad, who got killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq. Usually, when you say your parents are dead, people don't ask too many more questions.

Sometimes, when things went bad for me, I had to tamp down parts of my dad, but other parts of him were good. I hoped hard those good parts were mostly the ones I got.

I kept the picture of my mom right where it was in my drawer, and I still have it. I liked thinking about her, the same way I liked thinking about Santa Claus even after I figured out he was just my dad sneaking around in the night after I was asleep. I never talked about knowing Santa Claus was my dad, just like I never talk about my mom. For me, the truth isn't always what's true.

Some nights, I take the car Uncle Crane brought me, and I go out alone. I don't even take my phone. The rides take me further than my old walks used to, I look for my mom and dad. If I see them ahead, I drop my foot on the accelerator. No matter how fast I go, they always slip from sight. I drive on all night sometimes, knowing I'll never catch up.

Uncle Crane goes to work early. He leaves his house before dawn. Some mornings his taillights burn hot red in the driveway as I pull in. We both throw up a hand, but there are rarely any words. I get out of my car, climb the porch and go to the front door. I can't go home, so I turn the key in the lock and I go inside.

TERRI KIRBY ERICKSON

Pixie Cut

for my daughter

Black-eyed, black-haired girl of thirty-two,
I can see you reflected in a mirror
across the room—one of many mirrors and multiple stylists
with tattooed limbs and hennaed heads, clipping
and snipping. And I am thinking that the cloth draped
around your body, catching the sheared locks that tumble
to your shoulders, your lap, the floor, seems as sacred
as white linen on an altar table—your face emerging
like an angel sculpted from the clay
of your long, dark hair. You are smiling
because you see at last, what we all have seen—
how beautiful you are, that the woman you imagined
has arrived—
and she is and always has been, you.

TERRY FORD

In the Middle House

Before my morning swim,
I park in the lot behind the Y.

Forty years ago,
three frame houses with trees and gardens
stood where only asphalt
and neatly marked parking spaces
seal the living earth,

which has no memory—I hope.

In another century
when we were new,
I rented the first floor
of the middle house—white frame
and wide front porch.

*When I return
into the living earth,
free me, please, of this.*

Today I left my car
where once our bedroom was.

*When my remains are ashes,
let this fire no longer burn.*

On the porch's phantom swing
my own ghost should be perched,
waiting patiently
for yours.

"Look where it comes again!"

Perhaps she sits, embroidering—
I did crewel work then
to pass away the waiting.

*In the morning,
as always,
three frame houses
with gardens
when I return,
embroidering
our not yet ashes
and your always
absence.*

SUSAN CLAIRE GLASS

Waiting for Joseph

September's mockingbirds were late,
Their young paused in mid-phrase
and we had August in June,
and October in August.
We questioned this almanac, but didn't worry
until the morning when two jet liners
thrust themselves like hands through wedding cake
into the World Trade Towers.
Then smoke ate light
and lives, as if meteor struck,
wafted piecemeal on to Battery Park:
one deposition
one resume
one loan application
one shoe.
Seven thousand voices rose, vapor trails,
phone calls: I love you.

You were not born that morning, Joseph.
But someone was.
To her and to you, we'll have to explain
while nursing, while rocking,
how it was possible for the garden
of one of these nineteen hijackers
to beckon with peonies and fall onions.
He had children,
drove neighbors' children to soccer practice.

"Shave and dress neatly,"
read the Arabic instructions in his suitcase.
"Watch for anyone watching you.
If asked anything, mention the fine weather.
You are going to Paradise."

I double at the gut,
not from labor, a pain I'd welcome,
but from the lunging blow of so much dying,
and from the smell of accusation,
my nation's cumulative, careless sin.
You, just born,
aren't responsible for the amnesia
from which the rest of us now wake.
But you have inherited its caustic freight.

Beyond My Window and a Thing Called Guilt

He was persistent like the tree I used to love,
the one beyond my window where the branches

curved then tapped against the glass—
how every night I'd hear a constant scratching

keeping me from sleep; a firm reminder of all things
he'd branded tasks we'd need to do,

and then one night that sound would gently dissipate,
but I was only dozing through the noise and fall

of twigs that tumbled slowly from that tree
until it barely stood at all, lifeless like a hollowed

form, its brittle bark began to slough with every gentle
waft of air. There was no knocking like before and I

began to miss that sound inside my head
because I wasn't needed anymore.

Camp Jesus

Bobby pulled his legs aside to allow his girlfriend's six-year old daughter, blonde, wispy and rail-thin, to slip past in the church pew.

"Where's she going?" he whispered.

"To the bathroom," Margaret replied softly.

"By herself?" Bobby asked. He pictured the rest room facility, a squat concrete building, on the far side of the church parking lot. Deserted, baking in the North Carolina summer sun.

Margaret shrugged, her eyes never leaving the altar. "This is about as safe a place as you can get," she whispered.

Bobby glanced at the man on the other side of the aisle. He looked like a stereotype of a junkyard salesman – unshaven, a bead of sweat on his forehead, strands of black hair plastered to his skull. But not a pervert, Bobby thought, for he knew better than most people that molesters never looked like you'd expect. They were ordinary-appearing guys with families, respectable on the outside, their inner lives black and twisted like licorice.

Bobby sucked in a breath, wishing that he had the power to conjure up a scrapbook of the secret lives of the congregants. He'd flip through the pages and track down the molesters.

"I'm going to check up on her," he announced. Without waiting, he tromped down the rough wooden planks of the ramshackle country church, fending off the prying eyes of the congregants.

Shading his eyes from the glare of the morning sun, he hustled across the parking lot. The vein in his neck pulsed. The facility was a squat, square hunk of moss-stained gray concrete, with glass block windows, and a sloping roof. It stood by a dirt path that led to the lake and campground where most of the congregants were vacationing.

"Lillian?" he called, his head angled into the curvature of the ladies' entrance. Birds and insects chirped in reply. And then ... a cry, a thin whine, like the chirp of an injured bird. Bobby cocked his head. The whining was coming from the men's room. He dashed inside.

Bobby braked on an empty, gray concrete floor, his head swiveling about. There, behind the closed door of one of the stalls, stood legs with trousers. Bobby clamped his fingers on the top of the stall and yanked the door with such violence that it rattled in its hinges.

A man stood inside, middle-aged, with thinning brown hair, beside a little boy on the toilet. Bobby recognized both from the campground. Father, with toddler son needing help. Both stared at Bobby with open mouths and wide eyes.

"What the hell?" said the man.

Bobby held out his hands, and took a step back. "I'm sorry," he said. The stall door swung shut.

"Bobby?" a voice called outside. Bobby stumbled out of the rest room.

Lillian stood on the gravel, smiled, and held out her hands in the sunshine. "Look, I washed my own hands!" she said.

Bobby sighed. "Why didn't you answer me when I called your name?"

Lillian frowned, a kind of how do I manage to put up with this. "I was busy," she said.

Bobby shook his head, as if to shake off the experience. "Let's get back to church," he said.

In the chapel the congregation prayed for the forgiveness of sins. Bobby felt certain it was useless for him to do so, though he knew he'd need Jesus' help to keep himself on the path of righteousness.

Maybe Margaret was right, he reflected. Maybe people in this campground were what they seemed to be.

Maybe there was nobody else like himself here after all.

KEVIN GRIFFIN

Scream

Inside Room 217 tonight
at the Wooden Indian Motel
somewhere in Indiana

my brother Patrick, forty-two,
listens to my latest goodbye and
puts down the receiver and

now he trembles over a candle's flame,
the incessant, unrepentant voices
echoing through his mind,

sonorous, full-bodied,
like resonant waves hurtling
towards a silent shore.

Black angels dip and dive
over the turbulent boardwalk
of his once radiant brain while

outside the declarations
of addicts and whores and dealers
push against gravity's pull.

Patrick downs another beer,
begs his small statue of Mary,
his St. Dymphna prayer card.

But the voices are for real tonight.
They to rip and tear at him,
force his retaliation, his scream.

Schizophrenia's prisoner,
he pulls the window shade open,
cups palms over his ears,

strains to see the bleeding
horizon falling into an ocean
of dark and soon today becomes

tomorrow and those voices,
though I cannot believe,
though our gods say otherwise,

may never, ever stop.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON

Hard Facts

The first; so ordinary.
She has to leave class early on Friday.

I hear it all the time.
But not for that reason.

The kick in the gut:
Her mother is driving her.

*

Alone; deep breaths behind a locked door.
She doesn't want my advice.

Why tell me?
Schemes tumble through my mind.

I count costs, make projections.
I barely make enough to get by.

*

Irony; the weekend is sunny.
She has her whole life before her.

So her mother says.
I cradle my mourning close.

She only wants what's best.
So do we all.

*

Monday: calm surfaces.
Every action has an equal and opposite.

Two absences follow.
When she returns, her eyes are dead.

What is my role?
I am involved in mankind.

*

New grief: sharp as sorrow's longing.
There was another.

This one glimpsed onscreen.
She exits the empty class, eyes brimming.

The breath sucks out of me.
I will never feel more childless.

CHAD HANSON

A Wine Rack Full of Ghosts

Betty didn't have too many people left. She lost her sister. Her parents. Cancer took her husband. She plays bridge at the senior center in the afternoon. At home, in the evening, she visits her backyard with a glass of wine. One glass turns into three. Hard edges blur. The part of her brain that keeps her in the moment relaxes. Her husband joins her in the suit he wore whenever he sailed. They laugh. Same as always. The wine will not admit his death.

Tracy Takes His Walk

He had come to dislike hearing, "Tracy... seriously," with that little pause after his name as though she were in touch with some truth that he denied out of some spite. But here those words came again, and, as usual, they made him want to argue, quarrel even. He filed away the phrase, *condescending tone*, for future use.

Leigh Ann kept going, "You know it's been a week now."

He didn't think it had been that long, but it was too early to start a back and forth. He could see she was gearing up a showdown, the way she'd made a show of going, "Pee-yew," when they passed in the hall yesterday. Okay, he did need to change his shirt, but she could always leave the house herself if it was that bad. Seriously.

Thursday morning was the start of Leigh Ann's off-day, a day that had gained significance because same as last Thursday she had no space to sit in her own house, no place to simply *be* without having to make allowances for his ongoing sulk. The week had become symbolic of the way chunks of our lives get gone, squandered. It had been a perfectly good set of days given to tiptoeing, measuring her words. They were days she would never get back.

And when she saw she was trying to stack the breakfast dishes quietly it made her mad. Or madder. Leigh Ann made a lip-moving vow to stop participating in this... what was it... his drama. She would not over-react, she would just stop being, what was the word, conditioned, yes, by his aggressive silence. And she would tell him she was sick of his big sighs. She needed to get current. Leigh Ann was not in therapy herself, but she had absorbed certain wisdoms from girlfriends who were. Plus there was always the stuff you picked up from daytime TV.

She moved to the counter separating their little kitchen from the living room and let go with a dramatic sigh of her own, what she hoped was one of those visualize-your-troubles-gone deals. She aimed it directly at Tracy who was once again dug into the love seat, siege central, thumbing his same old car magazine with an angry cadence, as if there were no hope of finding anything interesting in any printed matter anywhere in the world.

"You sleep all the time. You've stopped taking showers. You won't leave the house. You're depressed, Tracy. Or on the way there."

He recognized the start of an offensive, the big guns zeroing in. It made him work deeper into the cushions and put out little anchors like ivy on a brick wall. She was trying to draw him out, engage. This proved she was on the side of the county talk that he knew was making the rounds even though he had not heard it himself.

Leigh Ann decided she had to get him out the door so she could open some doors, air the place out. But how to start? She moved to the big picture window. There needed to be light in here, harsh photons from the outside world. She pulled both sets of mini-blinds that had never quite met right, pulled them so hard they clicked like plastic machine guns. She heard him wince at the sudden glare. Or maybe it was the noise. Either way it was satisfying.

Her reflection in the glass was soft-focus—she still had some looks. Community college guys checked her out if she was in the right jeans. Tracy wasn't the only fish in the sea. She made a flat-lipped face. He was her fish, flopped up on the bank and going glassy-eyed.

She should have told him two days ago, the Hardee's counter girls laughing, calling him, "that doofus cracker." It had made the breakfast biscuit go mealy in her mouth even though they had no idea she lived with Tracy. Her saliva had stopped working faster than she thought possible. They had also mentioned a note. She should have told him as soon as she got home, asked about the note, gotten current.

They rented the last house on McEwen Road, an orange-dirt turnoff from what everyone called the River Blacktop even though it was mostly just a quilt of grey patches. Outside the window was a vista of falling fields, just into what leaf season there was with all the pines. Through the morning haze Leigh Ann focused on the last, smudgy hilltop and wondered for the hundredth time if it was on the far side of the river, over in Bradshaw County, another world.

"Supposed to burn off and get nice," she said.

"Nice in here," Tracy said. He flipped a few more pages in the magazine, a *Car and Driver* from last year that looked like it had, at some point, fallen into the bathtub though certainly not in the past week. The magazine now naturally fell open to the road test of a turbo Saab, a newer version of what Dr. Meg Grundy drove. Tracy had never driven a turbocharged anything.

"You could go for a walk...or fishing or something."

She frowned to the window, pulling the blinds hard had been good, but now she was back to sweet-talk like he was one of her frail residents at Elmwood Convalescent. She was tiptoeing again, what she'd been doing since he got let go. *Fired*, she corrected herself; he'd been *fired* not let go.

"Tracy..." she gathered herself before asking. She had a right to though, she knew that. And so what if he had a little thing for the woman and got stupid? She knew Dr. Meg couldn't possibly have an interest in him same as she knew it wasn't realistic to expect one man to be different from the whole of men. She had lost a few women friends that way, getting too instructive on the nature of men.

"Look, you could at least tell me about that note they're talking about."

Tracy's head turned before he could stop it. God. Was it that bad out there? "What note? The one on the wall? It was a work note."

"That's not what the Hardee's girls say."

"Those meth-heads? Give me a break."

In the past year the whole county had taken an unsubtle notice of their new physician, Dr Grundy. Tracy was just the representative fool, the designated pinstata. Mason County was a bad place to get talked about. The old families and church-goers feasted on any indiscretion, preferably of newcomers. And once a victim was identified, wounded a bit, the pack moved in to take bigger bites just like in nature films. Usually their ire was directed at a Latino who was invariably called "Mexican" no matter where he was from. But now it was Tracy. It wasn't a unique dynamic, just a diversion to hardscrabble lives, one of the few they possessed.

"Work note." Leigh Ann tested the words while going back to the sink. "Whatever. The thing is, you're starting to smell. I mean, a lot of it is that shirt, but life goes on. You need to get on out of here. Roll away the stone. Seriously."

"Could you please stop saying, seriously?"

Tracy got up and went to the big window himself. The glare wasn't that bad anymore. There was so much room out there. The world kept stretching away while people kept clumping together, picking on each other in dumb little towns. So much was stupid.

"You know what?" His breath fogged the glass. This was the way the sun went, west. *The West is the Best. Get here, we'll do the rest*—his brother had played that Doors album so many times Tracy knew it by heart before he got to high school. He understood they were talking about California, but any west would probably do. *Get here, we'll do the rest.*

"What?" Leigh Ann let the word come softly, the way she talked when they first moved out here.

"You're right, I'm going for a walk, a nice walk." He nodded to the world. "Out past McEwen's land. Maybe they missed some pecans. Then who knows? I always wanted to see the horizon. They say it's more than just a line."

"Sounds good," Leigh Ann tempered her approval. If she sounded too happy he might change his mind. "Take a lunch. And put on your boots. It gets wild pretty quick out that way."

"Maybe some Creek are still out there. Funny how the people who stole their land are now the ones most upset about their old wall getting cracked."

"You were just trying to help, Tracy. You didn't mean to hurt it." Taking his side seemed okay now he'd said he was leaving the house.

He continued with his hurt-feelings logic. Him against the world now. "Yeah, I'm going to find me some Creek out there. Tell them, I'm sorry. That'll end the whole thing."

"They're in Oklahoma, dumb butt. What about me? I'm right here. Don't I get an, *I'm sorry*?" She stopped because he was moving, already at the back door, taking his hoodie from its peg. It surprised her he was really going to do it, leave the house. "There's some pimento cheese in the fridge. At least take an apple."

"That's okay. I'll live off the land." The door clicked shut behind him, somehow making a statement when it wasn't slammed.

Leigh Ann knew she shouldn't, but she opened the door. "What about that note, Tracy? They're saying it was a love note!" Her voice was shrill, wounded. She decided that's the way she was. She gave one last, nurturing she hoped, holler. "Do you have your phone?"

He shook his head and kept walking through the far reaches of their so-called back yard, picking up a stout limb, a walking stick perhaps, but after ducking through the three-strand fence, he stopped every few steps in McEwen's back pasture to take what looked like golf swings even though she had never known him to play golf. On the fourth swing the limb broke, and by then Tracy was down an incline, removed from Leigh Ann's view.

His plan was to maintain a straight line west from their back door all the way to the river, the end of Mason County, maybe eight miles distant, well into the national forest. There would be creeks for water. And he would gather pecans in McEwen's grove. But when he got there, it was a surprise to see that the trees on diagonal rows from the fence line. This bothered him, that he'd never noticed it while walking out here with Leigh Ann. It made him wonder what else in life he had missed. He filled his pockets with nuts, imagining it possible to live off the land—no job, no town, no talk.

He held to his heading through the trees. The haze had indeed burned off. He would give Leigh Ann that. It was breezy yet quiet as if all creatures sensed it a weekday, and here he was, a creature himself, unnoticed in their

midst, allowed as an equal. Or maybe he was noticed but didn't realize it. He couldn't decide. Either way, all seemed in its rightful place until he came to a mound of unearthly blue beneath the last row of pecan trees.

It was a frayed tarp, dulled to threads from UV exposure. Secured by cinder blocks, it covered McEwen's limb shaker, an implement which, once attached to his little Ford tractor, shook the poor trees by their necks, made them rain nuts. Old man McEwen must have gotten so excited from all his Number Ones, he'd just left the thing here. One of Tracy's first jobs had been climbing out on pecan limbs to shake them. Same for hay - no more did boys buck bales until their teen arms were pain stiff before a first beer. Now hay just got rolled up, encased in plastic. Pathetic.

She wanted him to take a walk? Fine. He would do as she wished. He ducked through the fence where they always stopped. He would leave the tree-choking contraptions, the diagonal aisles, the land of Indian swindlers. He would put himself beyond the reach of the county talk. Tracy tried to recall the old map on the library wall as he walked. It showed Pumpkin Creek somewhere out here. And then the river, a destination worth making sacrifices to reach. He pushed on through stands of briars mixed with poplar saplings, the transitional flora fighting it out after logging. He used his arms as a brush-guard and kept the sun, still observable behind clouds, as his beacon west as it began to slide that way.

The county had put on its best face to welcome their new physician same as Dr. Meg Grundy had welcomed the chance to knock down her student loans by taking up family practice in an under-served area. Women were especially pleased not to have to drive 40 miles for a pelvic exam by a female internist.

Meg Grundy looked to have floated down from some date movie, her hair usually in the thickest streaked braids, her clothes straight from last year's *Elle*. And that pewter Saab only heightened the allure. Her lunchtime jogging route went straight through town, her t-shirt revealing two inches of stomach, what prompted the Mayfair's front table regulars to track her progress then swap stale joke regarding their sudden need for a hernia check. Or how about that digital prostate exam? Who needs to be fifty? Better safe than sorry. In the last week though, a new crop of Dr. Meg jokes had surfaced, all featuring what's-his-name who lived out there off the River Blacktop with the Kirby girl.

Leigh Ann and Tracy referred to their living arrangement as, "our really long date," and this did defuse certain judgments, but mainly because she came from one of the county's oldest families. Her mother though, Mrs.

Edna, dismissed Tracy as "common." He was from down in Lester, and, as she said, "Nobody knew his people." Tracy bristled at such small town airs. "His people," he would have anyone know, had amassed a fortune after the Civil War from floating timber down to Darien. But two generations of alcoholic men between the wars had wiped it all out. "Didn't take long," Tracy shrugged. "But for a while there we had it."

Leigh Ann thought it romantic that he came from a "fallen" family, precisely the opposite of common. And he had some looks about him, like an off-season lifeguard pudging out, the old broken nose providing a rugged thing. It was easier to start with the physical and work back to the head. That had been her experience.

Mrs. Edna relented and got Tracy a job with a family friend, Mr. Jimmy of Prentiss Construction who had just won the contract to stabilize the Waddell House, a log and mud-chinked cabin, the county's oldest structure. Two state historical marker told its story—Jeremiah Waddell, the area's first white settler built the place with the help of Creek Indians only months before they were forced to sign the treaties that led to their long walk. Dr. Meg Grundy, new in town and eager for some civic duty, had volunteered for the restoration committee. The house had become her baby.

After an hour of slow going through briary undergrowth Tracy stopped to eat some pecans where the land leveled out a bit, the stillness like some vast blanket all around him. He knew he was now well off McEwen's land, deep into the national forest that issued down to an inevitable run of water.

He decided it could well be that he was lost even though that word implied a place you would rather be, a destination. The trees here were not old growth so men had, at some point, come to this gentle slope with chain saws. Or more likely with those long two-man saws and mules to snake logs out to the road, wherever a road was. Or maybe they pulled them on down to the river. No, this was above the fall line. His daddy had at least taught him that much.

Tracy estimated it as almost a flat acre here, a natural homesteading spot. But clearing the trees, allowing the sun entry for first a garden then actual crops, how had they ever done all that with no power tools? And the stumps. You'd have to have boys or nearby kin to make a go of it out here. The thought made him tired. People couldn't do that anymore. They'd gone soft, were almost a different species. Stuck living in towns. And now he'd turned into one of them.

On the crew's walk-through with Meg Grundy, Tracy noticed the plank floor caused her brow to wrinkle. The boards had sagged from supporting the weight of an interior wall for almost two hundred years. Old Jeremiah should have put a beam up under there to start with. The sag though was not part of the job for Mr. Jimmy's crew. They were there to flash the chimney, beef-up the front steps and build a clogging stage outside, all for "Pioneer Days" later that month. The Waddell House was not that much of a festival attraction, but it was all Mason County had.

When the rest went out to site the stage, Tracy stayed inside with her. "I've jacked-up floors way worse than this."

"We're having a structural engineer come out to look at it," she said.

"Structural engineer?" His laugh came louder than he'd intended. "This will come right out with a little jacking."

"Preserving the wall, that's the concern. Look." She gave a slight pull on his shirtsleeve. "Feel it. What was your name again?"

"Tracy."

"Feel it, Tracy. This is exactly what they saw and felt so long ago. The Creek had a recipe." She rapped it with her knuckles. "See, still hard. It's got boar's hair as a kind of binder."

"Do you ever just floor your Saab?" He asked. "You know, in third, to feel the boost kick in."

"I got it mostly for Syracuse winters," she said. "But sometimes if I'm in the mood, and there's open road, it will get right up and go."

"Yeah, what is it about speed?"

Meg Grundy had laughed the way a girl laughs, and Tracy knew he'd said a good thing because it had just popped out. He hadn't thought about it. There was something about her laugh, gaining her notice. It made him want to do it again.

"I could fix this floor," Tracy said. But she wasn't listening. They were calling her from outside to come pick a mortar color for the chimney.

It was the pain of clearing stumps that soured Tracy on this spot as a homesteading site. Plus it was still in the county. Even his father's generation would have been hard pressed to make a go of it out here. Each group never quite passes on all the ways. Or maybe the sons are bull-headed, full of themselves. Staring down at devices.

He'd had a half hour flirtation with a piece of land, but now it was over. He took up his straight line again through stands of frost-withered yet still stickery blackberries and Queen Ann's lace. He decided it was better to not be on a path. Paths led to trails, and trails hooked up with dirt roads that

intersected paved highways that always went to a town. Exactly where he didn't want to go. He moved on down a long slope then stopped when he heard the splash of water.

The last few weeks of rain had pushed Pumpkin Creek up onto the trunks of birch trees so remote their bark bore no hearts or initials. The creek was not out of its banks yet crossing it, continuing his heading from the back door, was clearly out of the question. The water's push was persuasive, beckoning. It made him want to follow, see what all the fuss was about. He had never seen a good-sized creek empty into a river. It ought to be a sight.

When their first day at the Waddell house ended, Tracy stayed after the rest drove off hollering beer this and deer-stands that. He brought it all in from the bed of his truck—two six-ton bottle jacks, some concrete blocks, a few scrap four by fours. That's all there was to it. And a drop light. He would show Dr. Meg the quick, simple fix. Everybody was always over-thinking things. Too much school. Structural Engineer. That was crazy.

Something happened though in the crawl space. After he shimmied underneath, it became a tomb down there, the autumn light brittle, the ground preparing to go cold again. John Prine's, *Oh please don't bury me, down in that cold, cold ground...* came to him unbidden. He got spooked being up against those half-timber floor joists, still more logs than anything. He could see slash marks, tears where the tops had been flattened. Who had last seen this?

Tracy knew that the right way to jack up an old structure was to do it slowly, over the course of days, weeks even. But he got antsy in his confinement. There was a sense of company, those who did not approve of hydraulic pressure coming to bear on what certain hands had set in place. Plus it was getting dark fast, the death of a day, the planet tilting away from the sun, and here he was, alone in a darkening place.

He got in a hurry, and not wanting to ever crawl under there again, he kept at it, elbowing himself the six feet from jack to jack, pumping, grunting from the effort, stacking wood as dunnage, pumping again, driving wedges, jacking some more. The air was too old to breathe, the ground like a winter ocean, not a plaything. It could pull him down, keep him. He kept jacking, shimmying. Groans and pops came from above.

Keeping the creek to his right, Tracy worked downstream through stands of sumac whose magenta berries were perfect for that citrusy tea Leigh Ann liked to make. She'd be noticing all kinds of edible or useful plants out here. Her father had passed down so much of the natural world to

her, what his hard-drinking, pulpwood-hauling Daddy never found the time for—there was always some truck to be under.

Tracy noted he'd been moving downhill since leaving the house, and that the return trip would take longer, perhaps even be impossible in the dark. He knew Leigh Ann would start worrying once it got dusk, but now he was committed to a goal, the river. She had wanted him out of the house. Fine. He was taking a walk. Love note. That was crazy.

He tried to get back to his grumbling anger that had propelled him out of the house, but it wasn't there anymore. He should have explained the whole thing to Leigh Ann. None of it was her fault. And now she'd be worrying. What was wrong with him?

He kept following the creek until it skirted two fallen trees, a seat with back rest, a piece of furniture almost. Just for him. And after he'd sat a few minutes, Tracy began to pick up the treble of new noise, water meeting greater water, the creek hitting the river, what must be not much further down this marshy slope.

The sag came out just like he'd said it would. One ancient plank did split at a knot, but the floor looked much better, not perfect of course, but Meg Grundy would certainly notice. She would consider it well done. Tracy decided to leave her a note on the wall she so admired.

Dear Dr. Grundy—I went ahead and jacked up the floor since you seemed worried about it. It was really no big deal. Nice talking with you. I love your car—Tracy

Two days later three fault lines had traced their way behind the note, buckling the plaster in two places. The *Mason Register* ran a front page story with a descriptions of the chunk that eventually fell—*roughly the shape of Tennessee*. A State historian was quoted, "This is serious damage to one of the area's unsung treasures." Dr. Grundy was said to be, "heart sick" over the incident.

Events soon gained momentum. Pioneer Days was cancelled just three weeks ahead of time—no craft fair, no pony rides, no Moon-Walk bouncing tent. And by the end of the week Tracy had been fired by Mr. Jimmy Prentiss, and Mrs Edna Kirby found herself answering questions about what's-his-name who was living with her daughter out off the River Blacktop for all to see.

Most non-published versions of the story focused on the note said to have been signed, "Love, Tracy." And from there the talk gained a life of its own, the Hardees girls deciding, "Your lover, Tracy" made it juicier. They were mad, vindictive even, because they had planned to set up a kissing

booth outside the old house as a Mason Rescue Squad fund-raiser. But now all plans were on hold. Frozen hot dogs were returned. The town only had two drive-through windows, but once something got to both of them it was beyond recall.

Tracy skirted the mucky flat of the creek's delta before finding a broad rock where he sat, satisfied with himself for doing what he set out to do. There was a great show of sound and foam as the mud-daubed creek washed out into the slower, slate-colored river that absorbed the creek's energy and moved on as if little of consequence had happened. Old man river. He don't do nothing. Not one beer bottle or Vienna sausage can marred the scene. The noise from the combining waters drowned out two crows whose mouths he could see moving on the top of a spindly pine across the river. He stared to the crows for a long time before laughing that they were free as a bird over in Bradshaw County.

He eased down to a sandy stretch that was almost a beach and splashed his face with water. This cleared his vision to a string of flat boulders crossing the river just upstream. Their spacing beckoned, stepping stones for some yet-to-come giant. He took off his shoes and socks—barefoot, come to a river.

Tracy stood there for some time before he pulled his hoodie over his head. He slowly unbuttoned his shirt, its stink somehow lessened by the day's air. He removed it then his undershirt before going on to his pants, underwear, folding and stacking each garment on the sand. He tied the laces of his shoes together and hung them around his neck. Then pressing his clothes to the top of his head with one hand, he waded in, making course for the first broad rock.

The water was cold yet tonic, the bottom going quickly from sand to muck to ooze, one foot always leading, testing for a drop-off. Chilled water on his balls did not seem right, caused him to recoil, yet he kept moving, even as his sneaker necklace almost got wet. He waded on to the second rock where he first threw his clothes to a dry spot before climbing up himself.

The granite was warm, still holding some of the sun's blessed energy. He noted he was over halfway across—he was now officially rid of Mason County. The river cut a passage on and on, picking up contributions from creeks the whole way, becoming a force down past Lester where his people had once amassed wealth then pissed it away. How had they gotten themselves back from Darien to ride the nest load of logs down? Bought horses? He had no idea.

He lay back and allowed himself to be lulled by the flat current moving around his rock. He considered his clothes, how warm they would

feel. The sun had dropped below the first Bradshaw County ridge, leaving him in deep shade, darkening the grey-green of the river that looked in no hurry to leave the Piedmont, absorb Pumpkin Creek, other creeks then keep going, eventually joining the Oconee to form the Altamaha under whose name all this water would continue its imperceptible fall across an ancient sea-floor plain to the world's ocean. Sitting up with a start, looking downstream and feeling a first shiver, Tracy could see none of that, but he knew it was all there.

RYAN HAVELY

Only the Dark Matters

The best way to self destruct
is one at a time, orderly like.

You're wearing a universe —
it's on you like a tunka, and you

are too. Wave your arms, try
swatting it away. I dare you.

They never tell you how easily
a world can end, how easily

you can humiliate a mountain,
pull a river's pants down,

wander drunk into the desert
to die. They never tell you

how two atoms never brush
against each other, how their electric

repulsivity keeps them infinitely
somber, how you'll live

your whole life
without touching anybody,

how you'll live your whole life
electrically repulsing everybody you know,

pushing them slightly away, one atom
at a time, no matter

how much you might be in love.

LOWELL JAEGER

Grandma's Basement

Dad had to fix something broken down there
every fall, and I'd shiver and quake
following his footsteps into the musty dank,
thirteen stone steps below daylight.
Where the black coal-fired furnace waited
on its haunches like a blind beast
smothered in cobwebs and dust, its ductwork
tentacles groping toward the floorboards above.

In the yellow flicker of Dad's lantern,
shadows dodged along cinderblock walls
wet with sweat. While Dad banged on this and banged
on that and pried rusted couplings with curses and grunts,
I'd stand guard like a green recruit, half sturdy soldier
making certain Dad didn't kick over his light, half
momma's-boy — too cowardly to unclench his fists
and fetch Dad's wrench where he'd dropped it.

I'd clamber out of that hole holding my breath
till I could touch sunshine and swallow fresh air.
And felt my shoulders relax when Dad lifted
the heavy storm-cellar doors, fastened the hasp,
and snapped the padlock shut.

I'd sit invisible in the kitchen. Listen to the furnace
whispering beneath us. Listen to my heart
pounding. Listen to Grandma complain
about Dad having ruined her dishrags
scrubbing soot from his face.

ANDREW JARVIS

The Robber

That bird is the last
to feel his treasured things,
its webbed feet walking
on his hidden seawall.

He hides gems in there, a cave
of treasured shotgun shells,
watches without hands,
rippled clam broaches,
everything full of wonder.

And the gull still breathes
when then the tide waves
away all the shimmering,
spouting his shining things
stolen by the robber.

He sees its wings escape,
fleeing in getaway sun,
all his watered memories
surrendering in flight.

LORRAINE JEFFERY

Verdict

The cards are stacked like old quilts
tossed onto a shelf after a long winter.
Faded hearts, lace trim, pink roses and ribboned script.
Eighty years of words and paper—
kept.

We stare at the worn box awaiting judgment.
One daughter reaches for gilded edges and raised lettering.
They don't make cards like this anymore.
We nod and grunt.

To my dearest wife, she reads
and I see our father's spidery hand.
Well, it's nice to know he loved her.
We know.

She drops it back with the others.
So what do we do with them?

The dusty silence seeps out of the old paneling,
and runs down the walls.
We think of our own drawers,
over full of memories,
and want to save theirs.

So they go in the trash?
The word grates on our ears,
but the force of it pushes our heads down
into a nod,
as the gavel falls.

Breaking Point

Mary Louise always said Jesus knew everything in advance. I don't know where she got that, like I don't know where she got off starving herself for so many years that she ended up in that wheelchair on my front stoop, abandoned like a kitten.

If Jesus knew it all, why didn't he clue me in? He and I didn't have that mind-meld he had with Mary Louise. What if I wasn't home? But I was. I was up to my elbows in bread dough when the doorbell rang. I turned the doorknob with a linen towel, and there she sat, drowning in cotton fleece.

"My God, Mary Louise? What are you doing here?" I looked past her. It was the typical Wednesday: trash cans at the curb, a lawn service trailer halfway blocking the cul de sac.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," I remember her saying, like Calvin in one of his essays on predestination, quoting God. But memory can play tricks on you, and if she had really said that, would I have brought her inside? Would I have hauled that heavy chair over the threshold and parked her at my kitchen counter while I shaped smooth, white, pliable dough into loaves that looked remarkably like her hairless scalp? Without the ears, of course. Who ever heard of bread with ears?

We sat on my screen porch that jutted out over the Savannah River. Mary Louise balanced a MacBook on her lap. The rising bread loaves sat in the sun next to us, straining at the cloth like breasts in a cotton blouse. Mary Louise's breasts were long gone, melted away like every other fat cell her body could burn for fuel.

"How did you get here?"

"Debra." Mary Louise flipped her hand in the air, dismissing her daughter, her only living relative. Even if the link wasn't biological.

"When is she coming back?" I said.

Mary Louise caressed the laptop's touch pad with her index finger. Her nails were short and lined.

"She's not." She tapped the pad. Click. Click again.

"Not what, Mary Louise?"

"Not coming back. Not ever. Good riddance. I don't need her and that pretty boy husband of hers telling me what to do. You know I can't tolerate the pretty boys."

I ignored her crack about my college boyfriend. She wasn't going to turn me into that insecure girl again.

"Debra drove 10 hours and just left?"

Mary Louise squinted at the laptop screen.

"You need a shade for out here. There's glare on my screen," she said. She rubbed her hand over her scalp, and the loaves of bread quivered on the baking sheet.

"You're not planning to bake that," she said. "The smell makes me sick to my stomach."

I could bake the bread at my neighbor's. There the aroma would be welcome. But it was the principle of the thing. It was SO Mary Louise to just barge in. Barge in and take over. I liked my solitude, setting my own schedule. If I got in mind to bake lasagna at 2 a.m., no one could ask me if I was insane. And if I wanted to spend my afternoon sitting on this screened porch staring at the Savannah, well that was also my choice. She made choices, too. She'd chosen not to eat. At least in the beginning it was a choice.

"Aren't you taking anything?" I said.

"Any what?"

"Anything to keep the food down."

Mary Louise laughed and coughed into a tissue that appeared from up her sleeve.

"Nothing to keep down. Not for days," she said. Her finger joints moved underneath her skin. She coughed again and pressed a nearly-empty sleeve to her chest. "I think that was another rib."

"A rib? My God!" I reached for her. What did you do with broken ribs? Tape them?

"Nothing to do. It won't heal. If you tape it something else will break."

Had she read my mind? No, we probably learned to tape ribs in a shared first aid class. She was strong then, muscular. She played field hockey. She danced. She ate real food.

Mary Louise tossed her dirty tissue onto a green square of my checkerboard porch floor and put her hand on mine. It was dry and cold, like one of Anne Rice's vampires, swooping in to suck the life out of me. My fingers were pudgy and soft, middleaged hands. They always surprise me, these signs of middle age. On a good day a 25-year-old looks back at me in the mirror, confident and full of promise. On a bad day, and don't ask me why I'm always surprised by this, on a bad day I see my grandmother looking back at me. On those days it takes everything I have not to crawl back into bed.

"Are you in pain?" I touched her forehead as if to brush away a lock of hair.

She shook off my hand and dug around in a flat red bag attached to the inside of her wheelchair. She pulled out some crumpled foil and a wood and brass pipe with a small bowl.

"I can't believe you still have that," I said. "And use it."

"Get me a light," she said, poking a bit of hashish into the bowl. "Debra took my lighter."

"How do you even get the stuff?"

"I have my ways." Mary Louise pointed the pipe at me like our old sociology professor used to, poking the stem in the air toward a student from whom he expected an intelligent comment.

"You," she said. "Get me a light."

I broke the first match I tried to strike, a long skinny fireplace match from who knew how many Christmases ago.

"You always were clumsy," Mary Louise said. "From the very first."

It was a word smack across my face. Mary Louise's cuts were not scalpel fine and subtle, but jagged and angry like a dull serrated knife. She started the day I arrived in the freshman dorm with my two long braids and cut-off overalls. She sat on her bed and waved her hand toward one-quarter of our dorm room.

"Your side," she had said, trailing a stream of cigarette smoke from the fag held between her finger and her thumb. She paused to make sure I was watching.

"My side," she said. She pointed to the rest of the room. "Questions?"

She looked at me with her eyes half-closed, a James Dean look I attributed to the long curl of smoke twisting toward her straight-cut bangs. I hoped we could sort it out later. After all, I'd just arrived. If I was a big fish in a consolidated high school, Mary Louise was a whale. The bio the university sent me beforehand said she was a National Merit Scholar and math prodigy from Chicago. I was hoping she wouldn't see me as too much of a hick.

"You always dress like Heidi the goat girl?" she said.

So much for first impressions. I tripped on the rug and bumped into the edge of my desk.

"Walk much?" she said.

If I'd talked back to her then things might have been different later, but I wasn't clued in to the politics of dealing with girlfriends. They always seemed one step ahead of me, even physically. A junior high classmate who's chest prominently poked out underneath her bra once pulled my T-shirt away from my neck and looked at my bare chest.

"You'll be swelling up soon," she said with some authority. I grabbed my shirt neck and went into the house.

Girls were too intimate, too intimidating, too much, like my neighbor's Siamese cats, making baby crying noises, slicking down their fur, purring one minute then clawing the skin off the back of your hand the next. Boys I understood. With boys you knew what was what. And once they said what they had to say it was over.

With Mary Louise it was never over.

Mary Louise took a big draw on her pipe and rolled her head against the back of the chair, holding the smoke in for so long I half-wondered if she was still alive. She tried to hand me the pipe.

"You kidding? It's been years," I said.

"Could be that's your problem," Mary Louise said.

"You think?" I looked through the porch screen to the river below, scanning the water for passing boaters who might smell something. Mary Louise took another drag.

"The Angela I remember was reckless. A murderer." She let that hang in the air. "Of the innocent, of course."

She narrowed her eyes and attempted that James Dean look again, but the predatory stare had lost its muscle. I thought of children needing sponsors for a dime a day.

"The past is past," I said. Even my quiet voice seemed to echo across into South Carolina.

"Is it now? Says the one of us with a future."

"And that's my fault?" I stood up. "I've got to see to the bread."

The loaves were more than ready to bake. If I wasn't careful they'd collapse, expanded beyond their capacity to sustain themselves. I slid them into the oven, gave them a quick spritz with water to make crusty crust, and turned on the timer.

I put two glasses and a bucket of ice on a tray with a bottle of Jack Daniels. The bottle was decorated with a ribbon and a congrats card from my agent to celebrate the bourbon cookbook I'd finished when, last year? The year before? I drank mostly wine now, but it didn't seem like a wine kind of day. Besides, Mary Louise had always liked bourbon.

Mary Louise had drawn her legs up into the wheelchair under an afghan she took off the back of the wicker love seat. Her eyes were closed.

This screen porch was my favorite place, an extension of the kitchen, and it hung out over the river on some kind of supports that the home inspector told me were "very well planted," whatever that meant. From here I could go out a side door to another deck that wrapped around

past my bedroom with its wall of glass doors that I slid open at night to catch the breeze. The inspector told me the wrap-around needed more uprights to be safe for children, but I neither had nor expected any.

I sipped the coolest top layer of bourbon and watched the river. I liked its permanence. A few early leaves floated on the surface, headed for the rapids just down river, where they would swirl around boulders and stuck logs on a futile trek toward the ocean.

Over in her chair, Mary Louise extended her palm like a little tray for a glass. Waiting for me to notice.

"I thought you were asleep," I fixed her drink.

"I still have nightmares you know," she said.

"Nightmares?"

"Nightmares. Are you deaf?" She opened her eyes and shifted in her chair. "I know I'll see hell, and the spot right next to me?" She pointed at the floor. "Got your name all over it."

I touched my tongue to an ice cube. It was slick.

"I can see it, pale as pale can be. And bloody," she said. "God, there was a lot of blood."

Oh, I remembered the blood all right. It made red streams in the hexagons of grout around the white floor tiles, following the lines like Pac Man creatures, but Pac Man hadn't been created yet. I had stood shivering, one leg inside the claw-footed bathtub and the other feeding the tile floor, unable to will one leg to join the other, cramping and crying and praying to God this would just be over. Mary Louise had half-carried me to the hospital.

My doctor saw a rejected IUD he'd inserted only that morning. Mary Louise saw the fetus I'd delivered on the tile. Safer than a coat hanger, the IUD.

I refilled my glass.

"We've been through this before," I said. "Borrowing urine isn't a cardinal sin."

"I knew what you were doing and so did you. Cheating the test. He'd have never put it in if you were pregnant."

The oven buzzer sounded two long beeps.

"What was I supposed to do, Mary Louise?"

"I told you what to do," she said. "You and me. We'd raise it together."

The buzzer went off again. I could just see my bread burning around the edges. I slammed my drink down on the glass top of the end table and went inside. The bread thumped hollow on the bottom. It was dark brown, but not burnt. I slid the loaves onto the cooling rack.

It felt like my heart was somewhere in the back of my throat, pumping blood straight into my ears and eyeballs. I knew better than to drink with Mary Louise, so why did I? My blood pressure was up. Sometimes it got so bad I could hardly see. Now though I could see Mary Louise on the porch pounding the ashes out of her pipe into the dirt of a potted hibiscus. She refilled her pipe and struck the match herself. She always was capable, Mary Louise.

What possessed me two years ago, after decades of silence, to agree to connect with her on a social network, I can't tell you. I must have seen my college years through a prism, a retina-burning white light refracted into a rainbow of memories. Rainbows and unicorns and all things fanciful. And false.

We got together on neutral ground, a restaurant near a West Virginia rest stop. Mary Louise was recently widowed, her 25-year relationship with Kathryn ended by a car wreck. Kathryn had carried their daughter, Debra. Mary Louise barely touched her meal, but I wasn't that hungry, either. There was so much to say.

"Remember that night I found you asleep on the fire escape? You had marks on your cheek from using your tennis shoes as a pillow!" She laughed and sipped some water with a squeeze of lemon.

"There was the time we stole Pittman's coffee mug," I said. "It was like the Spanish inquisition. I know that's why I got a 'C' in Intro to Psych."

We were like kids again, lobbing shared stories across the formica table while salads warmed then were carried away by a waitress who just shook her head at our animated reunion. It would be another year before I knew Mary Louise's bones were dissolving like a chicken leg in a glass of soda pop. I was almost convinced our relationship had been a healthy one, two liberated girls negotiating our way into womanhood. But 30 years is a long time, and our relationship was like her bones, just way too many holes to patch up. What was I supposed to do with her now?

Steam hovered over the thick slices of bread I carried out onto the porch on a plate with hearty chunks of longhorn cheese. Mary Louise gagged at the smell and coughed into yet another tissue. I ate alone, making open-faced cheese sandwiches, which I washed down with bourbon. Bread was one of my specialties and one of my comforting foods. I could eat a whole loaf, and just looking at Mary Louise made me want to. She had her laptop open again, her fingers busy.

"You'll get fat, you know," she said, not looking up from the screen. "You've always leaned to the chunky side."

Chunky. She had loved calling me that and watched me gain and lose 15 pounds twice a year for four years. She'd wear my "skinny" clothes without asking.

"Can't let these jeans go to waste," she told me one night, rubbing her cigarette ash into the denim instead of reaching for an ashtray. "You'll never squeeze your chunky ass in them again." I left the room in tears and ate nothing but lettuce for a week.

Sometimes she'd materialize behind me at the mirror and brush her hand across my rear or reach around and cup a breast as if testing its weight.

"This doesn't bother you, does it," she'd murmur, as I trembled there in my reflection, afraid to look up, afraid to move, afraid to appear uncool or intolerant or anti-feminist.

"You might want to think about losing a few pounds there, Angela," she'd say, finding a roll of fat to pinch. I explained away the bruises to my boyfriends and to myself. Clumsy, I could handle. Victim, I could not.

I cut another slice of cheese and piled it on a chunk of bread, not so much hungry as defiant.

"One would think someone in your position, Mary Louise, would have learned not to be so obsessed with weight."

"Like someone who cooks for a living would understand," she said.

"I write recipe books, Mary Louise. I've explained that before."

"Cooks for a living. Maybe you could work in a school cafeteria, opening those big cans of pork and beans." Her hands paused over the keys, like a concert pianist caught by a still photographer.

She knew I hated working in the cafeteria in college. I cleaned trays, mopped floors, and stuck my hands in iodine water to sterilize glasses. We all wore jeans and T-shirts, the scholarship kids and the privileged, but the line of demarcation became very clear when we became the help.

Mary Louise snapped her laptop shut and wheeled over to me.

"I need a refill."

"You sure this is a good idea?"

Mary Louise shook her head at me, like I was an ignorant child. She sucked in an ice cube and rolled it around her mouth before dropping it back into the glass. Bourbon splashed on her chin and stayed there. The drop glistened in the sun that was falling below the tree tops now, and the rays were split by the trunks of the Georgia pines on the riverbank. I fixed her drink.

I wiped the bread crumbs from my lap and looked out over the water. Maybe she would wear herself out and I could call Debra. I wasn't going to play Nurse Angela the rest of my life. Or hers. She closed her eyes again, and

her head leaned to the side. I uncrossed my legs. My knees were stiff. I took two steps toward the phone and Mary Louise was awake.

"Have you thought about how you want to die?" she said.

"Not really. Frankly, I spend more time trying to figuring out how not to."

"I'm thinking the Indians had the right idea," she said.

"India Indians or American Indians?"

"Native Americans, you fool. The ancient ones knew when time came to die. They'd give away their possessions and wander off into the woods to die alone. So they wouldn't be a burden. Spend the last bit talking to the spirits."

"My brother's dog went missing right before she died," I said. "He found her in a little nest made out of tromped down grass like a crop circle. She was just laying there in the middle, all peaceful and dead with not a mark on her."

"At his house?"

"In the field across the street on his father-in-law's land. The dog roamed it all."

"That's what I'm talking about. I think cats do that, too. Find a place to die away from the family." She coughed again and wheeled over to the hibiscus. She pulled out her pipe.

"So, if you could choose how to die, how would you do it?" she said.

"Looks to me like you've already chosen starvation. That or to OD on hash and take my hibiscus with you."

"You can't OD on hash, and anyway, I wasn't talking about me. I asked you. In some Thelma and Louise scenario, whooping it up and driving right off a cliff?"

"I don't think I'm really the whooping it up type, Mary Louise."

"You used to be, so it's still in there somewhere. Covered over by layers of fat, most likely."

I placed one arm over my stomach, a reflex, then reached for another piece of bread.

"That wild child is long gone, Mary Louise. Long gone." But she was right. I had been just the type, a daring girl who gained confidence as our freshman year ran on. Parties. Drinking. Climbing into a locked athletic field at midnight to stretch out on the top row of the bleachers and see the stars. Playing with boys so different from those I went to high school with, boys who didn't see me as the freakish brainy one but as a girl to impress, to date, to touch. Oh, how I loved to be touched.

It was Mary Louise, for all her insults, her prodding, who showed me the ropes. Boiled water for instant coffee at 2 a.m. to keep my fingers

moving across the keyboard to finish a psychology paper for a professor I hated. Tutored me in math. Loaned me her best black turtleneck for a date with a fraternity guy. Made macrame earrings for my birthday. When I lurched into the room in the middle of the night, she held a trash can for me, a wet washcloth to my forehead, calling me a stupid bitch the whole time. The wild child. But that ended junior year when I met Damian.

"I left her behind even before we graduated, if you remember," I said.

"Because you let one guy suck all the life out of you. It was Taming of the Shrew all over again."

"Leave Damian out of this."

Mary Louise started coughing, gripping the edge of her wheel chair with one hand, holding her ribs with the other.

"He stole your spirit," she said.

"He stole nothing," I said. Damian, my shy troubled poet.

"Oh, no? You let him take your future. You're still mooning over him. Thirty years and you're not over him. His picture's even on your wall."

It was. I had decorated the living-room around the huge black and white print. Damian was sprawled in a chair, bare feet poking out of bell bottoms, a leather notebook open in his lap. He had been reading aloud, while I waltzed around taking random photos for class—candles and curtain rods and impromptu still lifes of the toiletries on his dresser.

"Keep reading," I told him. "Don't mind me."

But he put his poetry notebook down and turned his dark eyes on me like I was the only woman on earth. I pushed the shutter button down. Later, in the darkroom, when his image appear under the liquid bath of chemicals, I thought I had captured his soul.

"You never did know what he meant to me," I said.

It was on a Thursday that I saw the police car in his yard. At the top of the stairs an officer blocked my path. Around his edges I saw bits of the room. A fragment of electrical cord. Ripped chapbooks. An overturned desk chair.

"But I'm his girlfriend," I said.

"You Angela?" he said. "There's a note."

The stationery was brown. Damian's tightly-printed capital letters in black ink. Six words: *How could you choose without me?*

I leaned against the wall and slid down to sit on the top step. A police radio squawked, a woman's official but soothing voice, enunciating, like a poet on stage at a coffeehouse. Two guys with a stretcher stepped over me.

Choose? My abortion was two years ago. I hadn't even met Damian.

The officer stared at me. I swallowed. I shook my head.

He held out his hand for the letter, pulled the door to, and followed the stretcher.

I sat there, fingering a blunt nailhead working its way loose from the riser. I sat until my rear end was as numb as my head, until Mary Louise led me by the hand across campus and into her bed.

Mary Louise re-filled her pipe.

"See? Still mooning. Over something that was meant to be. Part of the plan."

"Who's plan?" It took my eyes a bit longer to focus on her now. The bread and the bourbon were making sugar in my system. "What the hell are you talking about, Mary Louise?"

"God's plan. Do you think it was coincidence we hooked up after all these years?"

All the nights we'd stayed up arguing philosophy with our floor mates, sprawled over thin cotton bedspreads from India, the air thick with cigarette smoke and incense. Mary Louise's premise was that everything was already decided for us. God had a plan for our entire lives, not just a plan for what we would become, but down to the details. For someone the church had rejected so absolutely, she and God were certainly cozy.

"So why do you study at all, Mary Louise, if everything's decided? If your grades are already set, why bother?" someone had challenged her.

"It's predestined that I DO study and get the grades I get," she had retorted. "I don't have any choice but to study."

"Funny you should bring up choice," I said.

"Or murder." She glared at me, a you-don't-want-to-go-there look. I rolled over and lit a fresh cigarette.

"Ok, we'll use your word. Murder. Say someone reaches their breaking point. Like that woman who set the bed on fire while her husband was sleeping. So she takes his shit for years, and then one day she just snaps. Kills him. If what you believe is true, then there's no breaking point when your perception shifts and you pull the trigger or dive off the bridge or strike the match. It's more the end of a process. The culmination of a destiny determined when sperm penetrates egg and says, "Honey, I'm home."

"At conception?" someone asked.

Mary Louise gave her the James Dean.

She tried giving it to me again, knocking her pipe against the chrome of her wheel chair.

"Do you, Angela?" she repeated.

"What?" I had no patience with this woman on my porch, dragging up mud from our past like a dredging barge. "What!"

"Do you think it's coincidence that I looked you up after all those years?"

"No telling, Mary Louise. I can tell you, though, I'm fixing to be sorry I answered." I knew I was crossing a line, a line between drunk and sober that I usually passed without recognition.

"No more coincidence than what happened to your precious Damian."

"You're saying God killed Damian?" I stood over her wheelchair.

She tilted her head up and blew a mouthful of sweet smoke into my face. "I'm saying God saw what you were doing, holed up in some room for days at a time screwing and reading poetry. I'm saying that wasn't God's plan for you, and he got you back on track. He liberated you."

"Liberated? Freed me to a life alone? Did he liberate you, too? So you could die from a disease based on vanity? Have you no mirrors?"

Mary Louise was coughing, not even bothering with a tissue, just coughing and retching dry heaves into her empty hand. I grabbed the rubber grips on the handles of her chair and pushed her through the screen porch door onto the open deck. The river swirled beneath us. I turned her wheelchair toward the sliding glass door. I yanked her to her feet, and I thought I heard the crunch of bone. Mary Louise didn't make a sound. I held her chin in my hand and pointed to the glass. The two of us were reflected there in the grey blue light of the last of the sun on the river, me in my cargo shorts and tank top, as thick at the waist as everywhere else, and Mary Louise, a stick puppet in sweats.

"Look at yourself," I screamed at her, jabbing at the glass with my finger. "Just look at what you've done to yourself! For what?"

"For you," she said into the quiet. "And now, now God has brought us back together. I knew he would."

Years reeled in my head, fast forwarding in black and white with a little red thrown in, Mary Louise pulling me away from the herd like a wolf after a sheep, lighting a candle for my aborted fetus, beating me with her voice, bruising me with her fingers.

Mary Louise in a corner of the library whispering at Damian. Mary Louise pressing against my cold, numb body under the covers, kissing the tears from my cheeks, my neck, while Damian lay wrapped in a sheet on a porcelain table. God's will, indeed.

It was like sunset on the ocean. One minute the sun was a colossal red ball on the horizon and in the snap of a finger, we were plunged into darkness. One minute I held Mary Louise by the neck of her sweatshirt, and the next, she was gone. How could a body with bones as holey as a loaf of ciabatta bread sink so quickly?

* * *

It's spring now. The drought is official. The water level at the reservoir that feeds the Savannah is at a record low. They've shut off the flow of water to the river to save the turbines, and the river narrows and shallows as she's pulled toward the sea. Downstream, when the angle is just right, I can see the glint of sunlight on chrome, a thin metal wheel on its side, spinning with the current, its spokes nearly invisible from rust. Who'd have thought the river would ever fall this low? Perhaps it was just another part of the plan Mary Louise and God cooked up. If so, he's not talking. At least not to me.

Spaghetti

The day my daughter tries to kill herself
I make spaghetti, leave it to simmer.
Warm October day, Indian summer,
I sit on the stoop, take in the sun.

I want to die, she says, eyes
empty as the bottle on the floor.
Silent doctors send the snake
deep into her translucent shell—
eyes wide, terrified, innocence fled.

Gone now the child from my backpack
who strained for blossoms out of reach
while I recited, *one, two, three*,
magnolia, forsythia, chameleon.

I want to wrap her up in me,
weave silken thread round slender stalk,
hide her home in soft cocoon
until my Psyche's grown her wings.
I do not take my daughter home,
leave her to wiser heads than mine.

A chill in the air, summer's gone,
I drive home, cold to the bone,
winter whispering in my ear.

Kitchen light above the stove
throws sick blue pall on dried red scum.
I scrape spaghetti shards
from blackened burnt-out pan
into the trash
at two a.m.

Crabbing

A pelican dunks his bucket-head
into the green as I tug
and relax the bit
of fishing line looped
around my pocket knife
feeling for gullible crab.

A boat's wake laps the poles
and sprays the backs of my knees.

I slouch on the pier,
a tropical peninsula stranded
in the James Bay, tied
to its real shore
by a deep tide
known only to myself
and the crab I will hoist,
boil in salt water,
crack with the hilt of a butter knife,
and pick the gill sacks out of.

A tug from below.

As I spool the string
on my wrist, I hear
quick but smooth
quick but smooth
and never catch the line
on the dock.

The bait breaches:
wet raw bird
and weight
and no crab.

JANET JOYNER

Ma Caulder

It was hard to identify her
as exactly human,
the way she squatted so still
on the river bank,
eyes fixed on what noon
was saying to the water,
head slowly rotating
first to one side,
then the other,
like some giant
tobacco-spitting owl,
expressionless
on its perch.
She had suckled so many
her tired breast button
would often fail, divulging dugs
that sagged like the sacs
dragging beneath bellies
of over-bred coonhounds.
The odor of her body, tobacco juice
and whisky-still run-off
announced her presence
before our eyes could locate her,
stumbling out of the vegetation
like a startled deer,
or the quiet bob-cat version
circling the edge of our clearing.
She could neither read nor write
our language. Or any other.
But what she did do was send
four boys to feed the screaming maw
at Anzio, Omaha Beach, St. Lo
and Bastogne, for the Bulge.

When the river,
like a big black snake,
opened wide its jaws
to swallow her final son,
I approached, to attempt condolence.
Had I arrived before indoor plumbing,
I still would have been too late
to cross from my *here*
to her *there*.

RICHARD LEOVITZ

First Snow

The little cabin in the woods
closed its eyes and fell asleep,
its chimney dreaming.
None but the owl on night patrol
saw the first flakes parachute to earth,
arrayed like the letters of a code
whose cryptic message disappears
before it can be deciphered.
Only the blank page was there
when the cabin opened its eyes
and the ones inside awakened.

What It All Comes Down To

The old woman lies at the bottom of the steps. Her lower leg dangles at an odd angle, as if it wasn't originally attached to her, but squirreled its way across the basement floor somehow, and latched on. A bloody bone, sliced through the skin at her shin, throbs. She breathes in and coughs, her lungs filling with musty earth and the sour smell of wet clothes in the washer, there for two days now.

"My name is Irene Finkle, she says to herself in a scratchy, high-pitched tone that she doesn't recognize as her own voice. "Today is Tuesday, January the 19th. And I'm going to be alright."

The ring finger on her left hand is blue and bloated. She holds her hand in front of her face, straining to focus. Her gold wedding band, almost invisible now, is sunk deep into the puffy crease. She gently strokes the ring with one finger, like it's a fragile baby bird.

"Floyd, please," she whispers, as if her ex-husband can hear her. "Why couldn't you have stayed? I needed you."

Irene shudders to think someone might hear her talk like this. Floyd is a bad man, after all, and she knows it. He's sitting in his easy chair across town right now with his new wife, Janice. Well, she's not that new. Floyd married her years ago. He paraded her around town for the last five years of his marriage to Irene. He liked her accommodating ways, he said. She liked to do things Irene would not.

Irene would never take off that ring. It was her silent protest against all that had happened. Against the foul things he had asked her to do in the name of marriage. She would die down here in this basement, serenading the heating ducts, before she'd acknowledge their vulgar, so-called union. Saying no sometimes didn't make her a bad wife, she told Floyd. Saying yes made Janice a better one, he replied, as he urged her to sign the papers on a frigid March day, with the smell of stale cigarettes and bourbon on his breath.

Irene never said no at first. She didn't realize she could.

"Here, turn this way," he'd say. "Put on these sparkly heels and get your legs up higher. Or, let me go in from the back." Floyd groped and grunted and slapped and bucked her like she was a wild animal, day in and day out. He'd speed home from his job at the oil change center, push his way through the door at 5:30 sharp, and with no thought of her effort to get dinner

on the table, he'd tell her to get ready. He smiled his big pearly-white smile and pulled a beautiful, gift-wrapped box from behind his back and shuffled on his feet like a little child, saying "open it, open it!"

The first time he brought home a gift, Irene shuffled with excitement too, dreaming of the star pendant she'd seen in the jewelry store window. The one with the little diamond that she'd told him she liked. But she was wiser now at twenty-two, and she knew that ribbons and bows were not for her. They were gifts he took great care to give to himself. Dread pumped up in her throat like bile as she untied ribbons in every color and removed box tops warily, as if a rattler might jump out and bite her.

What now? she wondered.

A red wig this time, long, with bangs.

"Wear this and let me call you Nurse Shelly," he said, already tearing at his clothes and throwing them on the floor. "I'll be Doctor Tom."

Not very imaginative, Irene thought.

"Floyd, the biscuits are in the oven," she said, beginning to undress anyway. She knew resisting was futile. She knew he'd hound her relentlessly and force himself on her with his doctor/nurse charade, while the biscuits turned black and the pressure cooker full of beans hissed and screamed. He entered her from behind and pulled back on the red wig like it was her real hair, until it was half off her head. He popped her on the buttocks in the same spot until it turned bright red and stung like a bee sting, all the while yelling, "Yes, Yes Nurse Shelly! I love it when you follow doctor's orders!"

When he was finished, he rolled a Pall Mall cigarette, poured himself a bourbon and sat down at their small kitchen table in the calmest fashion, and waited in silence. She stepped into her dress and buttoned it all the way up to her neck. She walked into the kitchen, pulled the smoking biscuits from the oven and scooped out a large pile of beans, avoiding the crusty, scorched bottom. She served him a plate and made herself a small one, and picked at it while standing at the counter.

He didn't thank her, but he never complained about the dinner either. He knew the state of it was his fault. He always ate in the same fashion, ravished, like a starving child from Africa, and then left his dishes for her to clean. He moved slowly into the next room, turned on the radio, and pulled up close to it. Irene knew he'd be there for exactly one hour. Floyd was peculiar about time. Everything with him started and began on the half hour.

"Damned politicians," he muttered while he listened and swigged at the bourbon. "They're all a bunch of crooks."

She soaked the pressure cooker pot and moved it to the side of the sink for cleaning in the morning. She felt a burning sensation inside herself

from Floyd's constant need. She'd soak in bath salts later, when he was done with her for the evening, but she knew that time hadn't come yet.

Floyd wasn't always a bad man. Especially in the beginning. She'd married him at 16, in a small brick church in Emma's Grove, in 1945, near the end of the war. She wore a white cotton dress and lace-up boots with her soft blonde hair in pin curls. He was 15 years her senior and oh was he handsome, in his double-breasted black suit, with shiny black hair to match, and transparent sea-green eyes. Before they married, her mother had fawned over Floyd like a school girl when he paid Irene a visit. It was as if he was there for her and not Irene. Floyd brought his bible along and Irene's mother liked that. She would usher them both into the parlor and they'd pretend to recite verses and prayers while she was watching, then secretly, they'd hold hands while she made tea for them in the next room. When Floyd left for the evening, Irene's mother would say, "Now, that man's a good husband for you, Irene. You won't find better."

On their wedding night, Floyd gently removed her clothes and promised her he wouldn't hurt her. His grown-man body warmed her enough to erase her nervous goose bumps and cause her to relax in her thin nakedness. He mounted her and pushed himself in carefully, a little at a time, asking her over and over if was she was alright. Irene had braced herself for pain, like her mother told her to, but Floyd put his hand over hers and kissed her and she felt none. Just the love and tenderness of a man she barely knew. A man she called her husband.

A limb from a leafless maple claws at the frosty window. A round robin sits for a minute, peering in at Irene, but soon flies off, likely as irritated by the scratching limb as Irene is. The cold cement floor of the basement seeps through her bones like liquid poison. She reaches for an old paint tarp, pulls it over herself and braces for darkness and the freezing temperatures to come.

"Is this what it all comes down to?" she cries, but nothing comes out.

The tarp doesn't help in the way of warming her, but the paint flecks of mint green and pale blue reminds her of her youth. Of a time when a bad choice was as simple as a color you didn't wish to look at anymore, and could be brushed over easily with something beautiful and fresh.

Large snowflakes begin to fall outside the window and Irene knows the town will close down like it always does, with the slightest dusting. She hears the radio upstairs. She keeps it on day and night for company. The disc jockey, Marty Sloan, is running through the closings, his voice deep and drawn out. No school, no church, no bingo at the senior center, no Meals on

Wheels delivery. Irene knows this means no Carmen, her Wednesday Meals on Wheels girl. No Carmen with the sweet, round face and coffee-colored eyes. No Carmen with the kind words and the little fluffy dog named Poquito that she brings along for Irene to pet. No Carmen with the meatloaf and the mashed potatoes and the milk. She would be stuck down here for another day.

She pulls the tarp to her chin, closes her eyes and imagines colors. Sunny warm yellows and greens, all the hues of spring, like those in a child's Easter basket.

"My name is Irene Finkle, she says to herself. Today is Tuesday, January 19th. And I'm going to be alright."

Her eyes close to black, and the whistle of a detached wind. A large freezer hums, its motor generating the smallest whisper of heat that warms Irene's injured leg. She smiles at the dream of a faint knock.

A Brace of Weeping Women

I. The Sod Widow Revises Her Vows

This rind of moon
casts little light,
a darkness still
less than yours.

I will not think
of your flensed limbs,
your soft eyes
turned to quartz.

If I could dream,
I'd flesh you out,
relish the weight of you,
the warmth.

It has rained for days,
seeped deeply down
into sated ground.
I have pledged

to tend you always,
scythe the grass
that creeps
to mask your grave.

II. The Grass Widow Grows Weary

How I wish
this gravid moon
would burst
and offer me relief.

I grieve to picture
your body on hers,
recall the rawness
of our youth.

If I could forget,
I would remember
to sleep, remember
to swallow my food.

I grow green
with bitterness,
lurch barefoot
across hapless earth,

water my pasture
with tears. I dig
a profound hole,
bury hope, stone love.

*—A red widow has lost her
husband due to his death;
a grass widow has been abandoned.*

DAVID LOOPE

Alma Mater

The ache of summer carries the
Scent of boxwood in heated repose,
The haze of afternoons before thunder.
Each August, my mind returns to
The bricks and mortar of youth, always
The locust-pitched rooflines of campus,
Where ambition stood erect
As colonnades in oaken sunlight.

We spend decades shaping the
Plywood annex of all that comes next.
It takes immoderate courage to wade
The gathering fluorescent days, but
We solder meanings with our English
Major remnants and wait
For the form, the vision,
The name of what we were to be.

Psalm 139

He was overtired, battling the bedtime routine—
refusing his pajamas, kicking, running away
each time his mother tried to help him
step into his pants. Not an outright *fit*,
it was something more like resistance—
hearing but not listening, spirited and wild,
willed with some energy
wrought in the core of the earth.
I stepped in, told my son
there would be no bedtime story
if he didn't cooperate, a threat empty as the void
long before there was mass, matter,
long before bodies hurtled around suns.
Amid all this, he kept asking,
When you were little, where was I? Was I not here?
Mommy, when you were little, where was I?
We looked at each other, his mother and I,
unprepared for such sincere diversion.
She told him she'd answer his questions
when he put his pajamas on, but he kept
flailing, falling, careening the living room
like a chunk of primitive rock.
He asked the same questions several more times;
she kept saying she'd tell him once he listened.
But he never did, and for all that fight, once it faded,
he just went to bed in his underwear
without a story, without an answer
to where he was—where all his substance
was written, continually fashioned—
when as yet there were none of him.
We waited to hear heavy breathing
signal his sleep before we entered
his room's darkness, and quietly,
gently as we could, put his pajamas on.

Geronimo

Sallie stupidly maneuvers her ice blue Suburban into a handicapped space outside Dreama's dorm. From Dreama's sentry post at the lobby window, the truck appears cold and creepy, an alien lurking under the maples' friendly glow.

When Sallie reaches the porch, Dreama scrambles to a pleather sofa. The phone message yesterday said everything: "Let me rescue you from that dining-hall diet—it's all fodder, not real food! How much weight have you put on?" At least the dreaded dinner date means Dreama can skip plate-scraping and dishwasher-loading, her work-study job.

Sallie breezes in. Her eyes rake Dreama head to toe. "Great to see you, D!" Sallie carries off her country look: she wears matching designer denim, as though she's ready to canter, on Geronimo, once Dreama's horse, to a mountaintop photo shoot.

Dreama sucks in her stomach to hide the freshman fifteen saddling her since September. She even showers with her eyes shut, to shield herself from her Michelin-sized thighs, her bloated belly. She migrates from class to class in bulky black sweats, and stashes herself into a corner like a garbage bag.

"Miss Whiteside, are you listening or sleeping? You're practically horizontal back there," her chemistry professor barked. Dreama died. Invisibility suits her, but it won't please Sallie, the flamboyant childhood friend of Dreama's dead mother.

Sallie's a big headful of bad ideas who's made Dreama her project. Once she susses out Dreama's foul mood, Sallie's efforts will intensify.

She now settles beside Dreama under floor-to-ceiling columns amid Colonial furnishings: the writing desk at which no one writes, the Williamsburg-blue walls. But this isn't Old Virginia. Oh no. This is Kentucky. Eastern Kentucky. Scarred hillsides. Trailers. Asbestos lawyers.

"Let's check out your room!" Sallie suggests.

Dreama's heart hits bottom. Sallie's expression turns to a pout. She smirks and sings out, "Bet there's a man up there."

In high school, Dreama babysat Sallie's two kids in a supersized house on a forty-acre equestrian estate. Every Saturday night before the Sinclairs departed on date night, Sallie called Dreama upstairs to corral and bathe the children, James Two and Chelsea, while Sallie gossiped,

over water-pistol squirts, pretend-farts, and the clatter of Big Bird's boat slamming the sides of the tub.

"Nope, no men," Dreama says now. No rock-star posters. No plush comforter with its matching pillow sham. She elects to omit these details, otherwise Sallie will insist they go shopping, to fulfill Sallie's decorating fantasy. Dreama once had experienced a Sallie-induced spree, and had returned with her hair in a Brazilian blow-out, wearing a faux alligator miniskirt.

Dreama can picture Sallie's M.O.: she'll sweep into the room, hang curtains, posters, and painted platitudes or worse: giant letters that spell "L-O-V-E" or "D-R-E-A-M." Dreama could change LOVE to "V-O-L-E," but how could she change DREAM?

Toss the D and create M-A-R-E? The thought lifts her heart, though G-Ro is a gelding.

"Come on. Let's see your room!" Sallie clamps Dreama's shoulders with fake-and-filled-in-weekly nails, a scary shade of pink.

Dreama shakes off the claws. "Roommate needs privacy. She's great, great, great. And there's a *great* view of the hills." Dreama has no roommate. The girl quit, Schenk's her last name. Dreama wonders whether Schenk's happy. Has she had a girl or boy?

College, Dreama had assumed, would fray the tether between Dreama and Sallie, but no, Sallie's Dreama-fixation strengthened, for reasons only God or Sallie's shrink could explain. (Dreama knows Sallie has a shrink but isn't sure about her God.) Dreama knows too much about Sallie, and now a visit to Equestrian Acres looms, her first in months, since her mother died and Josh shipped out.

But at least Geronimo, unless the Sinclairs had found him no longer useful to their image, will be peacefully grazing in the pasture.

"I know you must miss Josh, him over there with all those explosions," Sallie lowers her voice. "Sure you don't want to see my psychiatrist? He'll prescribe something to take the edge off."

Tiny hairs on Sallie's upper lip glint in a slice of light. The woman can't get it through her head that their two sets of worries—Dreama's and Sallie's—clash. Antidepressants, psychiatrists, acupuncturists, faith healers, or deep tissue massagers hold no appeal.

Dreama has no wish to be fixed.

She winces as she fiddles with her gift from Josh; the earrings had infected her earlobe.

"Okaaaay," Sallie claps her hands. "Let's get this party started. Where's your coat? The wind bites, brrr, what, no jacket? Didn't I give you

one? Never mind, probably won't fit now that you've gained weight. I've got a closet full."

Dreama fumes. *That jacket*. Dreama'd just noticed it lurking in the wardrobe upstairs, a shadow-Sallie, soft and creamy, not stiff and dark like Dreama. *I will not kill Sallie. I will not kill Sallie*. At least, not tonight.

Soon they putter through the college town. Sallie rolls through stop signs. Long, low rays stripe neat lawns. Leaves drift. Sallie drives one-handed, gesturing wildly, stomping the gas with her stylish black riding boot.

Sallie had often offered to "run" Dreama home after babysitting, back in the old days, as though Sallie would haul out sweats and the two would jog over foothills, creeks, and through trailer parks, finally arriving at Dreama's farm. When her mother died, Dad sold their place but now Sallie can't get gone fast enough from the shabby house she and Dad rent.

Geronimo may be the only sensible, upstanding guy in Sallie's subdivision of lawyers living in monster-mansions crammed into hillsides. Dreama and G-Ro grew up together, but Sallie'd bought him when Mom got sick, two years ago.

"You can ride him anytime, Dream. Honest," Sallie'd said. G-Ro's broad back and side-stepping gait had pissed Sallie off, though, and she'd quit riding.

Dreama smiles.

"What's so funny?" Sallie asks. Without waiting for a reply, she says, "Guess what's for dinner? I remember how you love fondue, you and the kids. All that dipping."

Dreama says nothing. She'd pretended to like fondue because Sallie always insisted it made the children's mealtimes fun. What's appetizing about Sterno fumes? They'd always fed the dog the minuscule meat chunks as soon as Sallie and James One disappeared down the tree-lined avenue.

Sallie cuts her eyes at Dreama. "Sure you're OK? My shrink could squeeze you in, just say the word. Anyway, tonight will be peaceful. Jim and the kids are out. We need to talk. You were always such a good listener. That's a gift. I mean that."

Not really. Dreama doesn't listen, Dreama dreams. The Suburban floats on the blacktop, uphill and down, beside swaying grasses. The gloom deepens and changes shades as the moon slides behind clouds, like the nap of Dreama's velveteen riding jacket when it's brushed in one direction, then the opposite. The foothills gallop by, dark pony shapes. But Sallie and Dreama are the ones flying. Dreama massages her ear lobe. An earring pops off.

"Uh-oh," Dreama crunches her hair with her fingers and feels around until she catches the silver peace sign. She pockets it.

"Are you getting much wear out of those leather pants? They were brand new. Honestly, I only gained a few ounces and couldn't close the zipper." Sallie gives her another once-over. "I'm sure they don't fit you now."

"What leather pants? Oh, those. Right." She shook her head. Dreama's lied so much she can't remember the truth. The slutwear. She's already handed them off to an overjoyed recipient, one who loves provocative clothes and easily discourages unwanted attention with her karate moves. "Have fun," Dreama'd told Mandy Liu.

Sallie stares straight ahead and stays quiet. When she finally speaks, her voice takes on a confidential tone. "Should we drive by your old place?" Without waiting for Dreama to weigh in, Sallie answers herself, and briskly slaps the steering wheel. "No. Too painful."

Just as well. Sallie's Suburban might scare the new owner's horses. Dreama's father sold their farm quickly, for much less than it was worth. Dreama remembers now the strange words: "haircut, underwater, mortgage," whispered at the visitation before her mother's funeral. Haircut? Dreama thought the word referred to her mother's remaining strands done up by the funeral-home beautician. She's only learned the depressing difference this fall in Econ 101—a different kind of loss.

Now Dreama's father sells farm equipment. Dreama's pondering professions, too, now that she's in college. Josh wants Dreama to be all she can be, like he is, but maybe she already is.

How would she know?

"Let's stop at the cemetery," Dreama says suddenly.

"No can do. No catering to grief, sweetie; it's not healthy." Sallie floors the Suburban. "How do you like the College?" Sallie's eyes stray from the road too long for Dreama's comfort, and they briefly lurch along the shoulder before returning to the asphalt.

"Ho-hum."

"It's only your third month!" Sallie says. "You'll grow to love it."

"I need to quit," Dreama says. Where would she go? Her father travels. She's consulted the school counselor, who listened attentively, so Dreama thought, until the counselor made a big deal of her infected ear lobe. "You should swab that with alcohol."

Dreama, who wanted the counselor to make her feel fine, just said, "I thought the college discouraged underage alcohol use."

He gave her a strange look.

"Kidding!" She'd tripped over a chair on her way out.

"Anxiety. You've got anxiety. I miss your mother, too. No one was a better friend to me. I'm in tears just at the memory. You know, just between us, James Two takes a wee dose of something. You should, too. A wee dose."

Dreama last saw James Two in June. A pain, but that kid knew how to have fun: he showed Dreama how to handle her M-1 when they played Battlefield 1942. He always won.

"It's a good thing James Two has me to look out for him—these schoolteachers don't know a thing. He's a hundred times smarter than they are. Mother's intuition? I'm a natural. And I love learning." Sallie touted her own education, though Dreama's mother said Sallie'd never finished freshman year once she got pregnant. Now Sallie prides herself on her "ability to cross class lines," as she phrases it, which probably explains the friendship with Dreama's family.

Sallie swerves; a buck's majestic rack looms in the headlights. She overcorrects, and the Suburban barely misses an oncoming camper. She keeps chatting. "Chelsea's already decided—at thirteen—that she's going to med school. I'm all for that! By the way, are you on the pill? You never know when you might want to have sex. Isn't it fun us talking like this? My daughter doesn't realize yet how lucky she is to have such an understanding mom. I'm here, whenever you need to talk."

Dreama nods but stays silent—it's golden!—as the car crawls up the half-mile avenue leading from the highway to the house. The pastures lay empty and dark. "Is that G-Ro at the far fence?" Dreama buzzes down her window.

"Hooo-boy!" A faraway nicker. "It is!"

"Yeah. Horses. Way too much work. And all that manure, with only Mexicans to shovel it. I can't speak a word of Spanish. Nada."

Sallie pulls into the garage. It's empty.

"Where are the cars?"

"Um, James keeps the Beamer at the office. We're on our own tonight; we can chat, have a few glasses of wine."

Outside, forty acres' worth of meadow and woods vibrate in the wind. A couple of owls scream at each other.

"Here's what's worrying me." Sallie hooks elbows with Dreama as they enter the front door. "James made partner. They have a humongous to-do every fall outside Lexington, a weekend tennis and riding gala, along with the asbestosis seminars. I'm not a rider; everyone else is. Tennis I can fake. A spa can make me over, but how can I learn to ride without humiliating myself? Can you help?"

Oh brother. Dreama stiffens. "Where's Mitzi?" The shepherd usually greets her.

"The kids have her out," Sallie says vaguely. She pats her hair, an unnatural shade of gold, Dreama now notices under the hall light.

"Let's see about that fondue fun," Sallie tosses her coat on the living-room sofa and heads for the cathedral-ceilinged kitchen. Dreama arranges Sallie's coat on a padded hanger. Chelsea's riding jacket rests inside its dry cleaning bag; James Two's skateboard sweatshirt, clean and dangling from a hook, smells of fabric softener.

In the kitchen, the clutter-free, granite counters gleam. Sallie kneels and sticks her head in a cabinet. "It's here somewhere, that fondue pot." Her voice sounds muffled.

Dreama opens the fridge, foodless except for a shrink-wrapped tray of veggies and cheese chunks.

Sallie's head emerges. She drats out a half-empty jug of rosé. "You're underage, but you can have one glass; the Europeans do that, you know."

Dreama sits on a stool and slumps over the counter while Sallie pours the wine into crystal wineglasses. Why not? Dreama sips and inspects the stone. It sparkles under the recessed ceiling lights; red flecks dot the stone—sick cells in body tissue. Yep, there's another one. She counts out fifty-three before Sallie taps Dreama's wineglass with a fondue fork. The ring reverberates.

"Cheers!" They clink glasses.

Laugh lines slash Sallie's cheeks. Mom's age. More wine. Another clink. They giggle and hold empty glasses to the light. Dreama dips her fingers into the rosé and massages her infected earlobe.

"Excuse me, please," Dreama says.

On her way to the bathroom, Dreama detours by the family room. It's empty. Only the braided rug where she played with the kids remains. She flings open closet doors. Old plush toys. But where's Monopoly, Risk? And Candyland? She'd spent hours in Candyland.

"What happened in here?" she calls, inspecting the few playthings left: a hundred-piece puzzle, medieval life inside castle walls, and a thousand-piece bucolic barnyard scene.

Sallie appears. "What are you doing, searching for signs of a family?"

Dreama pets a tiny plush horse, so lifelike, a Stiefe, and shuts the closet. She'd given the horse to Chelsea for her third birthday. She hugs it close and gives Sallie a look.

Sallie throws up her palms and rolls her eyes. She looks peeved. No. She looks something else, her expression, very un-Sallie-like.

In the kitchen, Sallie tops off their glasses.

"This wine is terrible." Dreama pours hers down the drain. "I'm drunk."

Sallie's face collapses. "I have news."

"I know."

"After he left, I figured something out: this house hates me. He wants me to hang onto it, to live here until the kids leave home. It's in the settlement, which I haven't signed yet."

Dreama sits for a few moments with Sallie, without speaking. Finally, she says, "Make the house fall for *you*, make it yours, and then decide. Tell the lawyer you need time. Or make *him* live here." Lame. What does Dreama know about houses or husbands? She needs to say something. She lets Sallie consider the puny suggestions.

Sallie, for once, has it right. This house was never a home. No way could it match the vibe of her own family's lop-sided two-story, its clanging radiators and bulging plaster beneath the leaking skylight.

Even the goofy rancher-rental she and her Dad lease has personality, life, especially with the fantabulous infinity clock, its numerals clustered in one spot. "Dreama, look!" Dad said that day, just two weeks after the burial. They were shopping to *pass* time. "Time can't be measured, and this proves it." They laughed for the first time since her mother's diagnosis.

Now, Dreama tells Sallie, "Here's the plan."

Sallie grabs her shoulders and squeezes her. "I knew you'd help. You were such a comfort to your mother at the end. You never flinched: you helped her struggle to the toilet, you helped her feed herself."

Her mom had refused the straw, the bedpan, all the sick-tools that make life easier, so the sitters said, to maintain independence. In fact, the day she died, her mother had managed to pull a sweatshirt over her head. "I'm heading out to the barn," she'd explained when Dreama found her mother crumpled on the floor.

"Give me a minute," Dreama says now.

In the bathroom, Dreama consults her reflection. And she'd thought she was depressed. Should she call 911?

"Are you okay in there?" Sallie calls.

No, Dreama mouths in the mirror. She claps her hand to her mouth.

"Really? Are you sick?" Sallie rattles the door knob.

Dreama bites her lower lip. OK. Go out there. Convince her that we can create a house she can love. Dreama throws open the door. "First, we dump his stuff, right?"

The leather recliner, a bear for the two women, but they unscrew the feet, heave it sideways through the door, and drag it outside. They drape a tuxedo, two Harris Tweed jackets, clothes he'd told Sallie he'd "come back for later." Books. Sallie decides against burning the rare ones. By eleven, the

moon pours light on the bedstead, desk, and credenza, and paperbacks fuel a modest bonfire, warming Dreama and Sallie as they lounge in lawn chairs.

"Help get these boots off, D."

Dreama plants her feet in the yard and pulls first one, then the other, of Sallie's boots.

"When I invited you, I didn't know you'd work me to death," Sallie says. Behind her, lights glow in the house's every window. "It's so empty. What if he wants to reconsider?"

Dreama shrugs. "Our place is still full of your old stuff. We hardly used it, but Mama wouldn't let us give it away. You remember those sleek floor pillows? We dragged them out whenever you came over. Ha!"

Dreama's laughter feels like falling dew. She flops in a leather recliner. "We were your project. Now, you're mine."

Sallie struggles to stand, barefoot in the damp grass. "What are you talking about?"

"You donated to us. We were your Goodwill."

"I was helping you! We had more money than we needed; your father mortgaged his family place so he could 'farm!' Farm, my ass! No profit in a farm. There's profit in asbestos."

"Expecting us to be grateful when you strewed your hand-me-downs all over the place?" Dreama launches herself from the recliner. "You didn't bring me out here to soothe me or my grief. You need help and couldn't ask."

"I'm leaving," Dreama says, backing away from the hot bonfire, away from Sallie.

"How? I'm not driving you." Sallie shoves her designer sweater sleeves up and down.

Dreama waits for a moment without speaking, and then stalks toward the pasture. The dew has pearled the grass; she's walking in jewels. She stops at the barn and peels a hay flake, sniffs its barn smell, and selects a lead rope. She steals along the fence line so sweet boy won't bolt when he senses her approach. Their old game; too bad she's got no apples or carrots.

She reaches him, the spotted horse. He stands still, patient with her as she strokes his neck. "Hey, sweet man," she croons. "We got us a ride to take, G-Ro, let's go." She pets him, whispering sweet-nothings, and slides the rope over his head. "You don't scare easy, fellow, do you? Me neither."

They walk to the barn, where she puts him in the cross-ties. She hoists a saddle, English, too bad, from its stand in the open tack room. She inhales the leather smell and saddles him up, not bothering to adjust the stirrup-buckles, and slips the bridle between his teeth and over his ears. He's accommodating her; she's lucky. She slips a pair of muckers over her shoes,

drops the cross ties, and mounts. Before they plod away from the barn, she leans into his mane and breathes, her arms and legs embracing the horse, his smells, his broad back. She could stay this way forever.

Soon she sits and reaches behind her and pats his croup; already his strength seeps into her. He crow-hops to the left, and she ever-so-slightly boots him, and forces him forward. He keeps his head up. Outside, they approach the gate, and he wants to get bucky, but she manages him, using all her muscle memory. She strokes his neck, his velvety mane. His smell unlocks all of her growing up, before the cancer, before the move, before Josh left, before, before, before.

She knows the unmarked roads, the utility rights-of-way. She and her mother rode this route to town many times. She jumps off, unlatches the gate, and leads him through. She closes and latches the gate, though nothing now needs fencing. She remounts.

She passes the house on her way to the dirt track.

"You'll never make it," Sallie calls from the step, leaning on her elbows. She swigs wine straight from the jug.

"Maybe not." Dreama steadies G-Ro in front of Sallie. If she doesn't, it's only because she'll die laughing remembering the mess in Sallie's yard. Custom leather couch, Duncan Phyfe chairs, window treatments strewn over railings.

"You know, you really do need to lose some weight. It's not healthy."

"Tell me about it," Dreama agrees. Sallie doesn't mean anything by the remark, just like Dreama hadn't intended to get vicious about Sallie's misguided charity. Dreama's heart lurches; her mother hated that stuff. "I'll bring G-Ro back tomorrow." Two hours, maybe three, to the College, over roads that wait, just for her, under the moon.

She's up for this. She pats the peace sign in her pocket.

Dreama and G-Ro back up and start to turn. She jerks her head, twists in the saddle. "You wanted riding lessons. Now's your chance."

"Forget that conference. You'll never make it. Just start back when you get tired. Besides, there's no room for me—your ass is too fat."

"Yeah, but G-Ro's a *beast*. This is one sweet man who won't let you down, I promise. Let's get this party started."

Sallie shakes her head. But a moment later, she sets down the wine jug and pulls on her boots, shyly approaching G-Ro. "Up close, he's huge."

Dreama nods. She slings one leg over the saddle and drops to the ground, holding G-Ro while Sallie makes it, third try, into the saddle.

"Oh God. It's scary up here," Sallie says, panic edging her voice.

"You get used to it."

They plod. Dreama walks cheek-to-cheek with G-Ro, the reins loose in her fingers. Sallie clutches the saddle horn and squirms. "I'm falling."

"No, you're not. Use your thighs. Grip him tight."

The track swings wide as they leave the Sinclair property. Grass divides pale dirt ruts that loop through the hills and cross shallow creeks thick with leaves. Stars salt the sky.

Underfoot, the solid ground still gives way, not yet frozen; overhead, tree branches dance and click, silver in the moonlight. Dark hills snuggle against each other. Dreama nuzzles G-Ro. They walk and walk. G-Ro tolerates Dreama's kissing and petting, even puts up with Sallie wiggling on his back and the sound of her silly, sob-broken chatter.

"What will we do when we get there, Dream?"

"Too soon to say." They keep going anyway, deeper and deeper into the cool, soft night.

G-Ro knows the way.

STEPHEN MASSIMILLA

Plum Summer

Black horses have a deep blue tint
to their eyes;
in the plum-dark night

they hang in the depths of sleep;
and like the sheen of an equine haunch,
the fruit's black skin magnetizes touch, misted

veil of questions broken
by the press of my thumb.

I would bite
into this sweet, cool planet, red coal
within, right down

to the hard grooved stone
through flesh as dense
as the gallop of blood in the lungs, pulse

of the heart
within the heart, here under fetlock
and throat-latch of the Horsehead

Nebula—celestial, sanguinary.

all thirst and murmur
to savor, rivering the tongue, parting
lips too absorbed to ask.

while consuming the universe,
do I dare?

Findings

Today I opened a book
you gave me almost
thirty years ago.
You had inscribed it:
So much love, J.

Finding you here
after so many years,
every part of me
rounds with feeling.

We ended
with your head bent
as you whispered your grief
while I scanned the horizon
and sniffed the air.

Slow to learn,
I was too late
to learn you.

SARAH MERROW

Night Creatures

your dream a moth
in ditzzy flight
the mind's free dance

each move *right*
each dive a perfect
moment of power

above your bed
of ether— and when
it lights and

crosses your pillow
ancient animal
on legs of thread

you reach for words
on vellum wings
dissolving

and dusted fingers
are all you have
and all you are

JED MYERS

Morphed a Little

Night is my morphine. I walk into it
onto the street, out through its teeming
uncertainties. Though it's thinned

with sprays of light, like an opiate powder
cut with flour or talc, it's potent
enough to set me dreaming awake.

Meet my extended family of ghosts—
we talk out our tangle of fates,
our moth-pocked mesh of dear wishes,

its death-torn edges like wavering
near horizons, loss-holes loosely
darned with insistences and denials,

all this deed-worn and frayed fabric
willing to scintillate for us in heart-light
alone, between us there in the dark,

as I walk late, with a fool's faith
there might be a fix. Can't we reweave
our mistakes? The night is a tincture

I think I can heat with memory's match-fire
under it, spoonful of nothing laced
with dim regrets and a dash of disgrace,

cooking it to my distress's content,
then through an unsterile puncture I make
with a cold point of dread, let a vein drink

the translucent elixir. Night, seamless
mixture of past and future, the one
substance I can imagine might fill

the lightless aching recesses like it
inside me — my ghosts and I wind up
packing these gaps with the gauze of neglect,

scraps of hopes tossed in doorway alcoves
and stuck amid sidewalk shrubs. Patched up
and dopey, knowing I'm leaving unfinished

lifetimes of a host of souls' business,
I do turn back — moon as my usual
witness not usually full-on awake —

ready to risk the dreams of real sleep,
morphed a little just by believing
some promises the night cannot keep.

Stopping Short

Near the edge of Rawlins, Wyoming, Semper Fred sits in a bar. Sipping a Golden Iguana, he pages through *18 Wheel Singles*. He watches the bartender, a stale man with grim wrinkles and thyroid eyes. The bartender wipes the counter in slow, listless circles.

Something stirs at the edge of the room. Fred looks up and sees a woman standing in the doorway. She's young, almost pretty.

"May I sit here?" she asks.

Fred nods and slides the magazine off the counter. Skirting the edges of a paper napkin around with his index fingers, he watches her from the corner of his eye. She tries to get the bartender's attention, muttering a soft, "Excuse me," once, twice, but to no avail.

"You need a little help?" Fred asks.

She says she does.

"What you drinkin'?"

"I'll have what you're having." She smiles.

Fred points down to his drink and holds up two fingers. He introduces himself and asks her name.

"Haley," she says. "You know, like the comet?"

"The comet, huh?"

"Yeah, I was born the last year it came by. My dad's a scientist, so..."

Fred nods as she speaks, thinking about how she was only a child when he enlisted. He was nineteen then. Trekking through the desert. Hiding in holes. Oil fires erupting into the sky. He shakes off the memory.

"So. What brought you to Rawlins?" he asks.

Road trip. Graduate school. Anthropology. Fred continues to nod through her explanations. She talks about her dreams, and he mentions a few of his memories. Three Golden Iguanas later, they rise from their stools, and Fred follows Haley into the night.

They cross the last street in Rawlins to the abandoned hotel where his 2010 Mack Pinnacle semi-truck is parked. Sitting on the flatbed smoking a joint, they stare out at the hills.

"There's wild horses out there," he says. "Real ones."

He looks over at her. She keeps her gaze on the hills.

"I read there is a frontier prison out there," she says. "First one in the west."

He shrugs. "Maybe so." He looks at his feet dangling over the flatbed's edge.

"What are you hauling here, Fred?"

"Valley Gold Vein Marble." He lifts the tarp and places a hand on one of the stone slabs, caressing it slightly. "There's real gold in it, too."

"Where?" She leans over to inspect the marble. He looks down her back, stopping at her hips, thinking...

"There's gold all over these," he says. He runs his lighter over the surface of the marble. "See, right here."

"It's so faint," she says. "Who wants gold in their marble anyway?"

"Rich people in big houses. Maybe some guy with a bossy wife." He looks at her to see if she is smiling at the idea. She isn't. "It's dangerous to haul," he adds. "The weight is so much that it would crush me if I had to stop short."

"These rich people, do they know you could die?"

He looks out to the hills. "Don't know."

"You *could* die," she says. "They wouldn't even know."

A cold breeze picks up off the prairie. He shivers and wraps his arms around his knees.

"It's not right, Fred," she continues. "It's like...you're a *real* person."

Real. He laughs a little and peeks up at the stars. They sparkle in isolated clusters across the dark.

"See, that's why I feel so conflicted about school, you know? I just want to be out in the world sometimes. With *real* people."

"The world has plenty of real people," he says. "I wish I got to know some of them better myself. I never got married..."

Fred stops, but he wants her to know more. He wants her to know he keeps his truck clean. He wants to show her he has a little refrigerator in the sleeper cab. He paid off the truck last month, so he is a homeowner, in a way.

"Gimme your fire, Fred," she says, fumbling through her purse. She pulls out a cigarette.

As he lights it, she cups his hand. Her hands are soft and young.

"Want to see inside?" he says. "See how a *real* person lives?"

She says she does.

They hop off the flatbed and head to the passenger door. He opens it, arm lifted, hand open, and presents it to her. She tosses her cigarette, its red ember trailing down until it hits the gravel. She looks at him and smiles, then climbs on the doorframe and peeks in.

He hops up onto the edge of the doorframe behind her and watches her crawl over to the driver's seat. *She wants a real person*, he thinks. Her

hands are on the steering wheel. *What does real mean to her?* She laughs and looks out the window. *Is this real to her?* He leans in, his figure casting a shadow over her.

She turns. Fred tells himself to go on, that there is nothing to be afraid of. But she leans against the window, chin pulling into her chest, shoulder rising to her cheek. He tries to tell himself that he is a *real* person, that she wants *real*, that *real* is why she came with him, that *real* is something between them, something in space, somehow tangible, something that he can now grasp, some *thing*, somehow tender and un-waiting and un-alone. But the word feels strange in his mind. And his hand is between them—reaching, grim, work-worn. And his years, that battle, this truck, *this* is what is real to him. Could he assume that *this* is what she meant? And who was *he* to even ask?

He pulls back, his shadow receding. Stepping down from the doorframe, his eyes search the gravel around his feet.

He walks her back to the bar in silence. As he heads back to his truck, he tries not to wonder if he scared her. Alone in the sleeper cab, he tries not to wonder this with all his might.

As the last of the stars fade behind the rays of the late morning sun, Fred returns to the bar and stands at the edge of its parking lot, wondering if she will come by again. He shakes his head, and he retreats. Lifting himself onto the driver's seat, he thinks of the heavy load he will carry on his flatbed to some rich couple's palace in the hills. As he starts his engine, he briefly wonders what will become of him if he has to stop short.

Cooper River Bridge

Alongside thousands
of other bridge runners,
our bodies block the clear Charleston
sky and sea, as the eroding marshland
curls green beneath.

This pylon of silver,
its rivets like buttons on an old man's plaid shirt.
Billed birds cry to their companions,
scraping the brown muck of pluff mud
from their wings. That musty smell's
all in my drinking water,
algae compounds leaving spots on my wine glass.
They say refrigerate your tap water—
for a nice, clean taste.

Where would the Holy City
be without its liquid economic engine,
but also its brakes—high tides flood
downtown streets anytime it rains more than an inch.
“Rain bombs” overload the drainage systems.
And it's only going to get hotter.

I wipe sweat, adjust my hair clip.
A fellow runner in jean shorts and a dirty tank top praises,
Thank you, Jesus! as we lean our feet
into that first grueling hill,
built to accommodate container ships,
their minds hold nothing
but air and steel, port and prayer.

Basaltic Grains

A dark-teal sea, its white fingertips pulling at the lowest drip of sky, the feathers of terns and gulls, slapping derricks, buoys, hulls, wanting to hold all it touches, taking it to rest on abyssal plains; trenches and cantons, ridges, shelves and monts, pressurized depths where the sun cannot reach and explorers are carefully gauging just how much longer they can last. Cousteau's red watch cap frames his face as the dolphins look on expectantly. He's quiet, confident, expecting things to go well because he's planned it that way, but the click of his tongue is the tell that there's a small chance for catastrophe—a diver's nagging concern about barotrauma. He stands alone, at the ship's prow, looking briefly up to that other great, blue-black mystery. A body of water is rarely literal. Typically, oceans are formless, and a man navigating the coral jungle returns with nothing more than salt-water hair and basaltic sand grains lodged beneath his nails.

JOHN REPP

Wooder

I love cedar wooder now,
the rusty wet in which I failed
to swim, the dry filaments
that clung to the incipient
hairs on my legs & arms,
the cuts the roots of the dead

trees opened in my soles.
The well-wooder, too, iron-tang
yet sweet to swallow or sluiced
down the cement slab to the frothy
puddle the outdoor shower fed

all summer, or maybe I love
the corrugated tin our father
nailed up or the buggy night,
the voice in the basement window

commanding me to turn the wooder
all the way off & certainly the ragged
towel, the shuddering cold inside

the kitchen door, the ancient Fedders
drying the last of the fragrant

wooder from my scrubbed skin I love.

M. C. RUSH

Idioverse

It grows harder and harder to imagine a nonviolent redemption,
a meaningful reparation, and, disinclined to violence,

somewhere between where Disney went wrong and
where Salinger went wrong but not poor enough
to buy a messiah from those who prophet,

I struggle to be compatible,
to smuggle out a poem, nourish to flourish,
escape from a confinement controlled by others,

those who indulge
in inexplicability or
an unseemly obsession
with occupation.

Why do we ask *How do you feel?*
when what we mean is *What do you feel?*

Breaking Clean

"I just miss you," I said.

He stared at me, waiting for more. Always waiting for more.

I looked around the car while I fingered a loose thread on the edge of my seat. It was dark, and I could barely make out his face when I spoke to him. Evening had blurred his already soft features until it seemed he was passing slowly into oblivion right in front of me. Our bodies twisted to face each other, but our gazes remained outside. Afraid to come in.

"I just feel like maybe this was a huge mistake. We could fix it, if you wanted to," I said. I hoped he wouldn't hear past my words to the soft, desperate plea just behind them, lingering in my throat, chomping at the bit. It had been sitting there for three months.

The windows had fogged up, but not how they used to. This fog was devoid of all passion and urgency. A passive moisture that clung to the panes and ran down them like hot raindrops. I felt them mirrored in my own expression as my cheeks flushed and my breathing became labored and unnatural. Waiting.

He looked out the windshield, either unprepared or unwilling to formulate a response. As if something outside would hand him the right thing to say.

Instead, he reaches out a hand to grab mine, which is now shaking. Continuing to stare out the window, he says, "I don't."

I give a moment for his words to register. Immense relief begins to flood my limbs as I allow this to wash over me. An answer. A clean break. I know it is what I need in order to return to myself. I allow a smile to sweep my expression as I look out of the window. The air inside the car has become stinky and stifling. I anticipate the burst of fresh air on my face. When I open the door, I will wrap my arms around my body and draw into myself, finding comfort and relief.

Back to the beginning.

Starting from scratch.

A blank page with nothing on it but my name.

MIA SARA

Just Another Day

We never remember our anniversary, until a month later,
and even then, we try not to make a thing of it.

Forever is forever, until it isn't. When we got married,
I wore a silver leather dress, a real trophy wife.

We danced the dance, the way that we do; close, clumsy,
not counting our steps, or hedging our bets,

because the best we'll ever get, if we're doing it right,
is just another day.

MAUREEN SHERBONDY

Stagger

Leaves stagger into the grass, drunk
on freedom and the breeze.

We have all fallen
from branches before.

We graze on grass
and fat, lazy raindrops.

Nothing is left
but time's white rind.

Home is wherever we land.

Colony

Bank swallows have colonized
high up the sheer face left
by the excavator that has
moved west in the gravel pit

and is idle now. Hundreds
of nesting holes riddle a band
of denser darker soil that is
broad and deep and now

looks like a sieve that is black
beyond. At first, this evening,
birds were arriving and leaving
by the score, flying at the earthen

wall only to disappear
as if swallowed by the soil, or
emerging as if shot from the holes.
Now, though, nothing is moving.

Not a single bird arrives or
leaves, the colony appearing
as abandoned as an Anasazi ruin
vacant for nearly a thousand years.

BRADLEY STRAHAN

Portrait of a Lady with an Ostrich Feather Fan

from a painting by Rembrandt

Surely those eyes,
heavy lidded, haunted
believed in death.
Those weary, sensual lips
refuse to speak.

Tired you were,
tired and your hands rest
where the master told you.

Dame, please sit this way.
So there, in your furs
with your jewels,
in your dust you sit.

Michael

One afternoon in August 1967, Michael wandered down the road. My father was building an enclosure for our garbage cans, an extension of the stone wall by the side of the road that bordered our property. I was outside with him, not particularly helping as I remember, just there, keeping him company. Michael and I were both seven. I never thought Michael might be specifically looking for me. I always supposed he was looking for a distraction, and I happened to provide it. We had moved to this Western Massachusetts hill town from the central village in the region only a couple of months before. Long enough to have met the neighbors, especially those with children around my age, though Michael's house was not even in view—maybe a third of a mile or so down our road, past the Burrows's on the other side of our five acres, past the old foundation and the wrecked blue car visible through the trees on the left, past the little white house with the yappy dog in front, across the street from the bus stop, just before the road forked.

Michael said hello. Maybe he asked what we were doing; I don't remember. It wasn't long, though, before he asked me to go back to his house. I didn't want to go. First, I was enjoying my father's company, which was why I was out there in the first place. Second, I was afraid of Michael. There were a lot of boys close to my age who lived at his end of the road. I was afraid of them. I was seven, an only child, and had spent much of my time around adults. Kids in general scared me, and boys seemed another species. Especially these who spoke in rough accents and had a smell around them suggesting snot.

I didn't want to go with Michael, but my father set down the rock he was moving, stood up, wiped the sleeve of his cornflower-blue work shirt across his brow, and said, "Sure, go ahead."

My mother never would have assented so easily and casually; she and I had a set of secret signals with which I could indicate yes, I wanted to do something, or no, I didn't, without risking social embarrassment or hurting anyone's feelings. Though my father loved me very much, he didn't think in those terms.

Since he had given his permission, I could hardly refuse. I trudged on down the road with Michael, past the Hillenbrands' red barn, past the Burrows's, past the foundation and the blue car. The boy who lived across

the street from us, the Hillenbrands' son Alan, a year older than I—which seemed like a lot then—liked to participate in a game of throwing stones at the wasp nests that could be barely seen through the leaves high up in the branches of trees. When a successful hit was made, Alan would come running down the street screaming for his mother, a trail of angry paper wasps after him. This was one of the first stories his mother told us about him when we first met her, or perhaps it is the one I remember. Doubtless this anecdote, and living in an old house where wasps habitually made nests under the eaves and entered through our attic, contributed to my horror of bees (I lumped in wasps with bees, indiscriminately). I wasn't stung until I was in the fourth grade—on the playground, while playing four square—and it was almost a relief, then, to discover that despite the hurt, it was not as bad as I had imagined. The truth was the hurt bothered me less than the thought of coming into contact with the insect, the idea of its legs and its ugly body crawling over me.

Michael's house was a simple box painted green. To the left was a dip into a small swamp, where groundwater collected. The house was considerably smaller than ours, tucked back from the road. We turned in by the mailbox. There was no car in the driveway. Michael's mother had short, dark, permed hair, like my mom. Like everyone's mom, it seemed at the time. I had met her when my mother took me to Sunday school at the United Church at the end of our road. She had been the first to approach us, was friendly, talkative. She seemed more attentive than the other mothers, more like mine. I liked her more than I cared for her son. As far as I know, Michael had a father who lived in the house with his family. But I never once saw him, nor do I remember noticing any evidence of him.

Michael's parents weren't there, and this increased my apprehension. Would my father have still let me go had he known? I told myself it would be okay.

Michael led me up the driveway to the door—as I remember, it was open, there was no key or unlocking, not so unusual then. We didn't lock our doors until some years later, when I was in high school and we came back to find a few small items missing. We never knew for sure, but the perpetrators in my mind were most likely Alan and his cohorts. We had bought the house from his family, after all, when they decided to build new across the street, and though at the time the incident only confirmed the nearly gleeful contempt I had developed for the hill-town kids by then, it is possible to see it in a less nefarious, even innocent light: Alan or one of the other neighborhood boys had probably tried the door on a lark and, when it opened, gone in, motivated by curiosity as much as anything, to see what we'd done with the place.

My contempt had more than a little to do with what happened that August afternoon when I was seven. I stood with Michael in his boxy kitchen: white refrigerator to my left; drab cabinets and counter along the wall between it and the stove; a Formica table with chrome legs; a couple of chairs against the adjacent wall. The floor was tiles of gray and maroon linoleum.

"Strip," Michael said to me.

Taking bearing of my surroundings, I was sure I hadn't quite heard him. "What?"

"Strip," he commanded again, this time more forcefully.

My stomach turned over. I understood. If I did not do what he wanted, he would hurt me physically. What I didn't understand was the nature of the request itself. I was about to go into second grade. I had no idea what he meant.

Michael took a menacing step toward me. "Strip," he glowered.

I flinched. "What does that mean?" I squeaked out. Beyond the kitchen, I could see the outlines of a dingy recliner, the side of a TV, and its flimsy metal antenna.

Michael looked at me as if I had fallen from the sky.

"Strip!" He grimaced, raising his arm. I stepped back.

"Strip or I'll—" I was backed up against the counter now, and sank to my knees as he advanced. He didn't need to specify the threat. It rolled off him. I could smell the snot in his nose. His raspy breathing was in my ear. He was the wasp landing on my knee, waiting to plunge in the stinger.

"I don't know what that means," I pleaded. Sweat dripped down my back; there was a long, thin pain in my stomach, my heart all but racing out of there, while I was trapped.

He might have hit me. He might have pinched me, kicked me, pulled my arm or my hair. At a certain point, the line between threat and bodily harm does not exist. At seven, I was unaware of hurt or violence sexual in nature, and indeed, despite the (to an adult) obviously sexual aspect of Michael's request, he never touched me sexually.

I don't remember exactly what Michael did, just the mysterious command and my begging. "Please, please, tell me what it means!"

I was openly crying now. I thought of my father and how he never would have let me come here if he'd had any idea that something like this would happen, and now I wasn't sure I could ever tell him.

At some point, Michael must have realized I was telling the truth.

He stepped back, looked down at me, crouched and whimpering on the gray and maroon linoleum in the corner, next to the refrigerator.

He leaned back and drawled, "Pull your pants down."

How to explain the relief? Instantly, my sweat dried, my heart calmed. At last, something I could do to affect my fate. He would not hurt me anymore.

I stood up and complied, puzzling, still not understanding why he should make such a fuss over such an insignificant thing.

Perhaps here I need to stop and explain. I had never received the talk most parents today at least understand they are supposed to give their children: about how some parts of one's body are "private," about "good touch" and "bad touch" and saying no, about telling an adult if anyone does something that makes one feel "uncomfortable." I think few, if any, children of my age did. In the mid-1960s, sexual abuse was not readily acknowledged.

That's only part of the explanation, though. My parents were university professors of a liberal persuasion, uncomfortable with the conventional script emphasizing the importance of a girl/woman being mindful of safeguarding her virtue. The script they—or I should really say "my mother," for this territory was assigned to her—did give me was the standard idealistic view of educated liberals in the mid-'60s to mid-'70s: There was nothing inherently shameful about the body. Beyond this, neither of us deigned to go. Me, out of ignorance; my mother, probably out of a naive faith that appropriate boundaries would be self-evident.

So in Michael's kitchen, when I unzipped my pants and flipped the rim of my panties between my thumb and forefinger, I hesitated not from a sense of shame as from the simple bizarreness, to my mind, of the request, and at his further gesture, peeled them down to near my knees.

He looked, then turned. I pulled up my panties, my pants over them. He gave me a tissue to wipe my face. I was not to look as if I'd been crying. He walked me home in silence.

The scene was never repeated between us. My father had hung a swing for me from a tree in what we called the "upper meadow," above another stone wall. I spent many hours swinging and daydreaming there, and after the incident with Michael, other neighborhood boys would saunter up, find me, and make the same request, almost routinely, without the menace I'd felt from Michael. None of them tried to lure me off my own property. Now I understood what was wanted, and I complied quickly and efficiently. Then it would be over and they would go away. Even they seemed bored by the ritual.

I don't know if I somehow mentioned these incidents to my mother, or if she looked up to the upper meadow, saw me and a neighborhood boy, and asked what we were doing. Given what I understood to be my parents' orientation, I didn't know what to make of it when, after I told her, my mother

pursed her lips and said something to the effect that while I'd done nothing technically wrong, I didn't want to be known around the neighborhood as someone who did such a thing on a regular basis. Confused as I was, I had a sense not to question her further. For the first time, I felt retroactively complicit.

I must have worried about what I would do the next time I was asked, but it never came. I was no longer a novelty in the neighborhood. I'm sure I did my best to head off possible occasions: I just had to pay attention when playing by myself, outside, and beat a quick retreat if I saw anyone coming. This became even easier once school started and my father would drive me into town to my '60s-style "experimental" private school, while the neighborhood kids took the bus to the public school. By the time I joined them two years later, in fourth grade, the incidents were far enough in the past to have been effectively forgotten.

Yet the residue remained. On the bus, I learned to stare steadily at the air in front of me and show no acknowledgement of their teasing. At school, I made friends with kids from the middle-class development down the hill, professionals' and professors' kids, like me.

And the hill-town kids learned to leave me alone, pretty much. One time, in high school, on the bus, some exchange occurred, and Michael said with particular venom, "That's just the way she is." He made a face. I smelled snot.

I knew what he meant. And it was true, I was stuck-up. I did consider myself superior to Michael and the other greasers who flunked classes, and even whole grades, and who hung out by the back doorways of the school, smoking; who wouldn't go to college and might have a brush with the law, or a record.

As I remember, after high school Michael went into the Army. This adds to my discomfort, given my social class's habit of sending boys like Michael to fight, while keeping their offspring out of what we have taken to calling "harm's way"—though this was in 1978, post-Vietnam. I wonder if he received an honorable discharge; what he did when he got out. Unless "career," he wouldn't have seen action: too old for Desert Storm. His name and surname are much too common to search, and even if they weren't, I'm not sure I would. The military might have made him or broken him. I can't think of him without thinking of some sort of PTSD; or about how my mother once said, about his mother, it was as if she was trying to make up for something.

I can imagine Alan Hillenbrand—he of stones thrown at wasp nests—with a partner and a family, but it's hard to imagine Michael with

daughters, or sons. What does he remember about that afternoon? Not my seven-year-old crotch; I'm sure he never cared about that. Does he remember my fear, my pleading, or my eyes refusing to meet his, the deal we made: You can do this, but I will never see you?

This story has not been easy to write. It's an incident I don't like to recall. I feel better if I push it to the back of my consciousness; if I say it belongs to a former life, one I've grown out of or transcended. The year 1967 is now a long time ago.

I don't like to remember my fear or sense of betrayal. I hadn't wanted to go to Michael's house, not so much because I was fearful of what he might do, but because I didn't like him, he held no interest for me, I didn't want to spend time with him. I hadn't foreseen what ended up happening, nor, of course, had my dad. This failure felt the worst and was the hardest to acknowledge, because I'd relied on my parents to protect me from this kind of experience.

Every aspect of the memory makes me squirm: the absurd vocabulary of "strip"; my not understanding; my relief upon learning the local definition; the ease with which I lowered my underpants with no sense of violation beyond what I'd already experienced, with the boredom of someone who would prefer to be left alone, who would prefer to have nothing to do with these other human beings; the defeated sneer on Michael's face; the tedium of riding the school bus with these lowlifes for nine years; my assumptions about the trajectories of their lives; my sense of privilege.

Because even when I was groveling on the linoleum in Michael's kitchen, in his ugly box of a house, I had, in some way, the upper hand. How this was communicated to me, how I intuited it, I don't know. I was different and would always be different. And I was proud of that. It would have been the case even if I hadn't gone to the private school. It was why I would be able to join the public school later with such little social consequence.

Focusing on the malevolent expression on Michael's face leads me to an obvious question that remarkably hadn't occurred to me before: Where did the whole "strip" idea come from anyway? I always assumed Michael picked it up from the other kids in the neighborhood. But what if he was the originator? What if he taught it to them?

Other boys who made the request didn't have enraged expressions on their faces. They didn't threaten me. Maybe because I complied before they had a chance to. But perhaps that wasn't the case. None of them took such pains to bring me to where we would be alone, unobserved.

It never felt like Michael's actions were motivated by curiosity. He couldn't have anticipated my not understanding his command, could he? But he seemed to enjoy making the threats; he seemed to enjoy my fear. Though

"enjoy" isn't the right word. It was more like he was desperately trying to enjoy it, anticipating a release that didn't quite come. It didn't come because, scared as I was, nothing changed between us. Michael could make me pull down my pants, but he couldn't pierce my dignity. He couldn't bring me down to his level. This must have confounded him, at age seven, and maybe beyond. All he could do about it was hate.

Is it possible, maybe even probable, that some version of what Michael did to me had been done to him? Much worse, though, because it had done the job on Michael he couldn't pull off on me: convinced him he was a lowlife, worthy of nothing better. Worse because it left him with a searing anger and humiliation he was powerless to assuage, that he could only make futile attempts to pass on? A cousin, an uncle, another neighborhood boy, maybe even his seemingly absent father? When my mother said it seemed like Michael's mother was trying to make up for something, I'd always thought she meant that Michael's mother felt guilty for ignoring him at some earlier period in his life, not paying enough attention emotionally to him. Or possibly, she was speaking in a code she knew I wouldn't understand. What if Michael's mother's failure was something greater, something more terrible than I ever could have imagined?

The fact Michael didn't molest me sexually, that the possibility didn't seem to occur to him, possibly mitigates against this interpretation. Or there's the "gateway" theory: His brush with me was only the beginning; maybe he did manage to pass it on, though if so, I doubt it gave him any real relief. Have the subsequent events of his life brought him greater peace and understanding? There's no way I will ever know. For me, the story is more about class and power than about sex, and about guilt, though maybe it is about all of it and how, like our lives, despite our best efforts, even when we would prefer them not to, they entwine.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR

When Persephone Returns to Hades

In September corn turns from green to gold
and ears sag like an old bachelor's testicles.
The silk, his spinster lover, dries up.

Tassels waggle like unpinned, brittle brown hair.
A young girl strips shriveled leaves from the stalks
to make corn husk dolls and stuff a maiden mattress.

A picker rolls through October.
The farmer shucks and shells yellow kernels,
measures bushels, fodders bare cobs to swine.

By November the brown stalks are stubble
scratching a withered landscape
until the plow breaks ground in virgin spring.

Standing Chimneys

I'm fascinated with lone standing chimneys.
I've wondered what it takes for a chimney
to survive a fire, or be intentionally preserved
as its mantle is stripped, exposed and vertical
in vague stubborn purpose for our questions.

I have an intense dislike of half-opened gates
leading to nothing, bookended by strips
of fencing, house, foundation, chimney gone.
This feels like a misplaced invitation
for re-beginning, without a single nail,
or splinter, or bit of the concrete sidewalk,
or shade tree left with which to start over.

This scares me. That a half-hearted inviting
gate would be all we have, that nothing
but oblivion might actually lurk at our rusting
entrances, that not a charred chimney brick
or chip of bleached mortar might remain of us.

KORY WELLS

Those Who Wish to Sing Always Find a Song

—*Swedish proverb*

It's tough to tend a merry tune. Consider
our tin ears, our tendency to sing,
like great aunt Ethel in her Sunday best,

a tad too loud, a bit off-key. We're bound
to muddle lyrics; worse, we can't recall
the second verse at all. And even if

we belt like Broadway stars, then what of those
discordant notes, that troubling minor key?
So much can clench our throats in steel-numbered rasps.

A shoelace breaks, a tire goes flat, the dog
barks all the night. It rains again. Then storms.
A single mutant cell divides. In time

all things go south. We lose our keys, our phones,
our shirts, our jobs, our friends, our minds. Our backbones
sag. Then supper burns, or a guitar

string breaks, and we can take no more. Until
we hear the thrush's flute-bright song. Our hearts
cannot refuse. We hum a few low bars.

Maxims of a Literary Father

Max Steele, esteemed professor at the University of North Carolina, had a reputation for being able to determine, after reading just a page or even a paragraph of someone's work, whether he had the potential to become a writer. And if he deemed him worthy, he would do all he could to help him. This image of talent judge, guru, and star maker put me in awe of him and I waited with trepidation and excitement for the day he would pass judgment on me.

Having realized in high school that I wasn't going to make it as an athlete, I had resolved to become a writer. Obsessive by nature—driven to practice basketball eight hours a day—I had brought the same dedication to the writing. The summer before college I lived in the family lake house, worked nights at a pizza parlor, and read and wrote all day.

Max was a big, soft-spoken Southerner with a refined elocution ("literature" he intoned) and a devilish grin. We were awed by his resume: while living in Paris, he was one of the founders, along with George Plimpton, of *The Paris Review*. He'd been friends with Richard Wright, whose wife was Max's agent. And he'd had an affair with Alice Adams, about which both had written stories.

Recently, however, his writing had slowed to a halt, and there was much speculation as to why. Some said he had dried up the well of the particular kind of writing he was doing. Someone claimed he'd had liquor on his breath in the professor's lounge. But most held that he simply exhausted all his creative energy in teaching and mentoring.

From the first day of the course, I listened to him with rapt attention, committing every word to memory. Max made us feel that our commitment to writing was a sacred bond; not a hobby or even a vocation, it was a calling, it was a life. And he talked to us as if we were almost there. "Make sure to get an agent from New York," he would say. "No agent outside New York will do. And you must hire a professional photographer." We wondered if this advice was a little premature, given that none of us had ever published a word. But we were inspired. Max made us feel that any other endeavor, by comparison, could never be as worthy.

At UNC, Faulkner was king. His work cast a long shadow over anyone who tried to write. Max's advice came from John Gardner: Read all the Faulkner you can and then read Hemingway to clean out your system. As

far as writing "Southern literature," he warned us to not overdo it: "Go easy on the dialect. A little goes a long way. And as for local color, you're only allowed one mocking bird or one magnolia in each story."

*

Other Maxims that have been seared into my brain: The first task of a writer is to be interesting. Use a typewriter instead of a pen because ideas are like flocks of geese; you have to shoot down as many as you can before they get away. Write down what's happening in your life. You think you'll remember it all but you won't. Any story about children should, in essence, be about adults. If you ever want to write about a dream, take a cold shower. Writing is a solitary act. Put a bunch of writers together and they stop writing. Poets envy writers like dentists envy doctors. And all this commotion about the new experimental fiction of Pynchon and Barth and Brautigan: it will pass. I've seen these "new waves" before. They never last.

Max said he would be glad to help anyone who wanted to work. "But don't come to my office just to shoot the breeze about writing. I've done enough of that. Bring me a manuscript and we'll talk." Once, after he assigned an exercise in class, he told me I was writing too slowly and deliberately. "You have to be more spontaneous," he said.

Max had a wicked sense of humor and he loved to shock. When referring to Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," he called it "A Hard Man is Good to Find." And Doris Betts's novel *The Gentle Insurrection* he called *The Gentleman's Erection*. When he'd had to fill out a form asking which body parts to donate to medical science, he put down "Penis and balls." He pointed out that as long as our fluids stayed inside our bodies, there was nothing disagreeable about them, but as soon as they came out, they were disgusting.

I worried about showing Max my work, especially after what happened to my friend Dale. Beating me to the punch, Dale gave Max a story before I did. Max told him he would read it over the weekend. This was on a Friday. Dale couldn't wait and contacted Max too soon because Max gave him a long discourse about the definition of a weekend.

My story was distributed to the class and discussed in a workshop. Fortunately, Max liked it. For one thing, I'd been lucky enough to write about a subject dear to Max's heart: father-son relationships. "The most important day in a man's life," Max said quoting Camus, "is the day his father dies." Max was going through a painful divorce and fretting over his two young boys. When he read my second story, which was along the same lines as the first, he suggested I make it into a novel. This made me a bigshot among my classmates.

Though I was unprepared to write a novel at twenty years old, I plunged in headlong. With Max's imprimatur and encouragement, I ate, drank, and slept it. Once Max saw me walking across campus jotting down notes as I walked. This, he told me, showed I was a real writer. "A writer is someone who remembers every word that was said at the party the night before," Max told me. "He has the feeling that he might have said something wrong to someone, not expressed himself well. He keeps going back over all the dialogues in his head and revising them."

"Stick with this voice," Max told me about my novel. "It's so natural, though I know that making a voice sound natural is hard work. The voice is wisecracky, but essentially innocent. I think the main character might be a virgin." I looked at Max but I didn't say anything.

"You know what this novel lacks?" Max said. "A masturbation scene." He told me to read *Portnoy's Complaint*.

*

I finished the novel shortly before graduation. Max told me he cried at the end. He said it was going to be published. He referred me to his agent - his New York agent. One day she came to town and Max invited some people over to meet her. Always intimidated in Max's presence, I was especially nervous that day. Max had had his house partitioned so that he lived in one half and his wife in the other, while the boys had free rein. Max announced that he'd been commissioned to write an article for *Esquire*. He had written one ten years earlier called "College Writing in the Sixties" in which he described the influence of fractured social institutions, including the family. Now they wanted him to write one called "College Writing in the Seventies." He said he was going to write about "the return of the father" and he wanted to accompany his article with samples of student work, including mine.

I couldn't believe it: to be published in *Esquire*! But though the magazine paid Max for his article, they never ran it. And though the agent sent my novel to a couple of publishers, it was never accepted.

When I graduated I was admitted to several graduate programs, but I feared that academia would be like death to a writer. What should I do, I asked Max.

Marry a rich woman, he advised.

*

Wanting to discover the world, have adventures, and live what I perceived to be a writer's life, I began by going to New York and driving a taxi. When I told Max what I was doing, he said, "New York's not the place.

You have to go to California. I know some people at a writing program there. I'll write you a recommendation."

So I went to California, amazed at Max's power to shape a person's life. I wondered if he ever had misgivings about using it. Sometimes I wonder if I would have continued writing without his encouragement or whether I would have succumbed to the pressure to pursue a safer, more lucrative career. Maybe I would have succumbed, or maybe I would have found another Max, or else invented one.

After two years in California I went back to North Carolina and got married, even though I had a feeling that this was something a writer should avoid, that it would inhibit you, domesticate you, reduce your possibilities for exciting experiences. When I introduced my wife to Max, he said, "Oh, this is your first wife?"

We moved into a small wooden house beside her parents' home and I continued with the part-time minimum wage jobs I considered a requirement for a dedicated writer: no professional career or corporate job to taint my vision or sap my time. The menial jobs—money changer in a video arcade, sandwich maker in a failing deli—proved useful for reading all the doorstep-sized classics—*Crime and Punishment*, *Anna Karenina*, *Remembrance of Things Past*—that are essential for any writer to know. I'd read that John Milton's father supported him for ten years, from twenty years old to thirty, so he could read all the classics before he began to write. This served as a counterbalance of hope to the deflating examples of youthful wunderkinds like Fitzgerald and McCullers who wrote masterpieces in their early twenties.

The years were passing and I was approaching thirty. My friends and siblings had already solidified their careers and I was earning minimum wage, doggedly rewriting a novel I'd begun in California. I told Max that the professors there had advised me to avoid flashbacks. "That's because Californians don't have a past," Max said. Finally I finished and showed it to him. Brutally frank, he said it was a book by "a good writer with nothing to write about."

8

I was devastated. It was one of the darkest times of my life. Thirty years old and back to square one. I had to do something drastic to escape the stagnation, shake things up. I needed to take off, travel, explore. Impulsively, though still in love with my wife, I abruptly left her and began my travels: Philadelphia, Florida, Nicaragua, ultimately Colombia. I went from place to place, job to job, woman to woman (or often alone), with no career, no

money, no health insurance, no family or friends nearby for support. Living precariously, I began to get results. My stories appeared in magazines, a dozen, two dozen. I wanted to send them to Max, show him that his faith in me had not been misguided. But I decided to wait until I put together a solid collection.

Though all these travails, I felt the assurance that Max was behind me, wishing me well, waiting. Wanting to let him know I was still on course, I wrote him a post card from Colombia in an exhilarated Kerouac-like style, recounting my adventures and continued efforts. A few weeks later I heard back from him: "Checking my files, I see that I've taught fourteen Tims over the years. Please indicate one which one you are."

I began to wonder if I had imagined his interest in me. Was I just one of many to whom he had casually given hope? Had I fabricated a literary father who had no desire to acknowledge paternity?

After some deliberation, I wrote back clarifying who I was. To my relief, he seemed pleased to hear from me, and to my surprise he said he'd like to come down and visit. As a further surprise, he said he'd like me to take him to the red light district as he was interested in writing an article about brothels.

*

Max never made the trip, however, and I only saw him one more time, on a visit home to North Carolina. He was over eighty now, old and frail, slow-walking, with unsteady hands. I told him I was getting my collection together and as soon as it was published I would send him a copy. He appeared to be pleased.

But then Dale wrote and told me that Max had died. He had just seen him in the supermarket the month before. I was shaken. I felt like I'd lost a father.

Searching on-line, I found a remembrance of Max by Doris Betts. She wrote that before his death Max had bought a grave plot in the Gimgul cemetery near campus. The tombstone said *Max Steele* and the rumor began to spread that Max had died. So Max had them change the headstone to say: *Max Steele-Not Yet*.

I also found a short memoir Max published in the *Washington Post* the year before he died. It read in part:

1976-1987

During my years of teaching, I have become intrigued by the absence of the father in student writing and in American literature. I begin assigning Kafka's famous 40-page accusing and accepting letter to his father, which

he never mailed. The letter is perhaps the most open and accessible of all of Kafka's work. He shows his father his bare heart.

I often ask students how many have said to their fathers, "I love you." Many girls but few boys say yes. Soon many students choose, instead of a third, required story, to write letters to their fathers.

2000

To begin the new century I have the walls of my condo painted. It is a way of saying to myself, at least, if not to my sons, that I will not go to a retirement home. In the redecoration, I move the picture of my father from a dim hallway, where I had thought it would fade less, to the wall beyond the foot of my bed. He is the first thing that I see each morning.

2004

The portrait of my father is fading fast. The hair is now pale yellow, not orange-red, or golden, as it was among the tangerine and lemon trees of my childhood, and the ruddy face is white. Sometimes in the earliest dawn light it is a skull, but if I wake later it is a ghost. Fully awake and in the morning sunlight, I see my own face in the portrait, as my students did. And in it now I also see the lifetime of yearning.

*

I am a college teacher now and every year I teach one of Max's stories. The students love it. It is a way of bringing him to life for a new generation of writers. It is a way of keeping him alive for me.

HELEN WICKES

In This Afterlife

They walk, but it's not quite walking, I'd say
they approach, with eagerness, not exactly

as you remember them, but somehow
better—at ease—having arrived at that essential
comfort they longed for, so unattainable
in life, and now stripped of all

that onrushing, kaleidoscopic existence, they've
acquired a simple presence, and as you step
closer, it's evident they have each become
what you hoped for, as you have surely

turned into someone they envisioned,
your silliness and evasions, your rigidity included,
but as you observe in their faces
an endless calm, where once there was boredom

or rage, adoration or bemusement,
none of this matters, which is in itself a small sorrow,
that their old hunger for you
to say something funny, sit for another hour,

and feed their slavering dogs, that's all gone now, and there
isn't a thing you can offer them, and nothing
you can take back with you.

HAROLD WHIT WILLIAMS

Born Again Homecoming

Therefore, their cars grow morbidly beautiful at the beginning of October and gallop terribly against each other's bodies — James Wright

High up in the bleachers
On some Friday night in America.
Each and every one of us high
On this euphoria, this distillation
Of the moment. We are all high
On pharmaceuticals of some sort—
Our collective gray matter
Conjuring up starbright lights,
The crowd's deathchanting,
The padded warriors in military
Precision, the glittering queen
And her small town courtesans.
Yesterday, today, tomorrow
Forgotten. It's as if god herself
Decided to exist, daydreaming us
In our sad drab team colors, all
Cheering on cue, the young men
Pounding each other's flesh
Down into the field, this earth
Most certainly, not spinning.

HOWARD WINN

There Will Always Be Answers

the mountains are silent
the doves speak
crows cry and rattle
the boat in the yard next door
does not move
shrouded in plastic
fog horns occasionally
sound as if puzzled
the light turns and turns
day or night warning
waves whiten the rocks
children laugh and cry on the street
wives work at what they must
husbands leave the street
and return at the end
there will always be answers
who will ask the questions

Cafe Crazy

Where the stink of old perfume drowns out the coffee aroma. Where the hurt girls go to watch their loves die. It's a slow death, Ruby will tell you. She's the day waitress, and man, she's seen it all. Old women with their walnut bodies who gave their lusty husbands one more chance, and others with a crush of dried petals that they just kept holding onto. Ruby wipes down the counter, lets the women rant and choke love by its scrawny little neck.

It's Friday afternoon, prime time for heartache. All the men who said they'd call, and Saturday's looking to be one long and lonely bitch. The door swings open, and three girls sulk in, swollen eyes and new to these parts. Ruby simply flicks them the onceover. And when they sit down at the counter, she doesn't bother with a menu. She knows exactly what they'll have.

JANE WOODS

Bird Migration

Can you hear them?
Behind still-green leaves
of old trees,
coming on ancient v's,
over wide quiet lakes,
over steaming cities
and licorice asphalt
and the Blue Ridge like
great stalagmites from the sky.

Over early frosted cotton and
rotten tomatoes, clinging but
not eaten—
Curving and descending,
until the trees are full
and brimming.

Can you hear them?
Growing cold and leaving,
but most of all,
their singing.

BARRY YEOMAN

Morning Thunderstorm in Small Town America

Countless dreams, transient
as a snap of burning wood in the fire-pit.
That ancient fire has turned to ash.

This morning a thunderstorm
cracks mystical and rumbles, flashes,
then opens up, an absolute deluge.

More dreams, torrential musings,
the building across the courtyard
disappears in a dense wall of water.

Silver sparks by the millions
bombard the surface of concrete
and asphalt, flooding the streets

in a matter of minutes, before
tapering off, crisp breeze of a cold-front
carrying that fresh earthy scent.

A chain-link of memories comes rushing,
flooding the mind with stories.
What are your first memories of water?

I recall as a child swimming underwater
in the Ohio River, town of Ripley,
where my grandad kept his boat.

Water too dirty to open your eyes,
I remember the strange muted sounds
of the docks, the boats, and the constant

humming in the ears, like a loud
electrical current, till I popped up
to the clarity of sun and air at the surface.

From placenta to playground
to summers lost without explanation,
to deaths of grandparents;

we grow older, as the water recycles.
I have a handy tap for thirst, while women
by the millions walk miles

with jugs of precious cargo on their heads,
and the rain comes this morning, a blessing
of ambivalence, the birds chirp about incessantly.

CONTRIBUTORS

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JEFFREY ALFIER is winner of the 2014 Kithara Book Prize for his poetry collection, *Idyll for a Vanishing River* (Glass Lyre Press, 2013). He is also author of *The Wolf Yearning* (Silver Birch Press) and *The Storm Petrel—Poems of Ireland* (Grayson Books, forthcoming). His recent work has appeared in *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and *Tulane Review*.

HARLEY APRIL completed her bachelor's degree at Barnard College, where she studied English with a writing concentration. April has participated in the International Women's Writing Guild Conference in Saratoga, New York, and Writer's Week at Manhattanville College. She has also been attending Writer's Week and seminars at the Writing Institute of Sarah Lawrence since 2008. Her work has appeared in *The Alembic*, *The Westchester Review*, and *Wild Violet*. In April's free time, she enjoys candy-making, walking, and swimming.

KB BALLENTINE was a finalist for the Joy Harjo Poetry Award in 2006 and was awarded the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize in 2006 and 2007. *Fragments of Light* (2009) and *Gathering Stones* (2008) were published by Celtic Cat Publishing. In 2011, two anthologies published her work: *Southern Light: Twelve Contemporary Southern Poets* and *A Tapestry of Voices*. Her third collection, *What Comes of Waiting*, won the 2013 Blue Light Press Book Award.

TINA BARR lives in Western North Carolina. She is the author of five collections of poetry, two of which are full-length books, *Kaleidoscope* and *The Gathering Eye*. She has received fellowships from the NEA, the Tennessee Arts Commission, and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

MILTON J. BATES has published several nonfiction books, including, most recently, *The Bark River Chronicles: Stories from a Wisconsin Watershed* (2012). His poems have appeared in anthologies and magazines such as the *Great Lakes Review*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and the *Wallace Stevens Journal*.

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JOHN BRANTINGHAM is an English professor and director of the creative writing program at Mt. San Antonio College (Walnut, California), the writer-in-residence at the dA Center for Cultural Arts (Pomona, California), an instructor at the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts, and the president of the San Gabriel Valley Literary Festival. He has published hundreds of poems and short stories in the United States and abroad. Brantingham's books include the poetry collection, *The Green of Sunset*, and the short story collection, *Let Us All Pray Now to Our Own Strange Gods*.

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AARON BROWN is a novelist and poet who lived for ten years in Chad, Africa. He is the author of the novella *Bound* (2012) and the poetry chapbook *Winnower* (2013), both published by Wipf & Stock. Brown's work has been published or is forthcoming in *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Warscapes*, *The Portland Review*, *jmwv*, *RELEVANT*, *Polaris*, *North Central Review*, *Windhover*, and *Saint Katherine Review*, among others. He lives with his wife in Lanham, Maryland.

SUSAN ELLIOTT BROWN'S poem "Oyster" was a finalist for the 2013 Rash Award. Her chapbook, *The Singing is My Favorite Part*, is forthcoming from Etched Press. Brown's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Best American Poetry* blog, *Measure: A Review of Formal Poetry*, and *Alehouse*, among others. Brown is currently a doctoral student in creative writing at the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi.

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BOB BUCHANAN'S poetry collection, *Beyond The Wall*, has been published by Cardinal House Publishing and was listed as a "Best Poetry Book" for May 2014 by Grace Cavalieri in the *Washington Independent*. His work has appeared in multiple literary journals, and he is active in the Scottsdale poetry community. Buchanan has a new collection of work coming out in 2015. Buchanan earned a Ph.D. in electrical engineering from Oklahoma State University, but rest assured he no longer has need of a pocket protector.

SHARON CHARDE, a retired psychotherapist and a writing teacher since 1992, has won numerous poetry awards, the latest being first prize in the Arcadia Press 2014 Ruby Irene chapbook contest. She is published over sixty-five times in journals and anthologies of poetry and prose, including *Calyx*, *PMS (poememoirstory)*, *The*

Paterson Review, *Ping Pong*, *Rattle*, *Poet Lore* and *The Comstock Review*, and has had seven Pushcart nominations. She has also edited and published *I Am Not A Juvenile Delinquent*, containing the work of the adjudicated teenaged females she has volunteered with since 1999 at a residential treatment center in Litchfield, Connecticut. She has two first prize-winning chapbooks, *Bad Girl At The Altar Rail* and *Four Trees Down From Ponte Sisto*, and a full-length collection, *Branch in His Hand*, published by Backwaters Press in November 2008, which was adapted as a radio play by the BBC, broadcast in 2012. *After Blue*, for which she won honorable mention in Finishing Line Press's 2013 chapbook contest, was published in September 2014. She has been awarded fellowships to the Vermont Studio Center, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and The MacDowell Colony.

For over 30 years, **JOAN COLBY** has been editor of *Illinois Racing News*, a monthly publication for the Illinois Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Foundation, published by Midwest Outdoors LLC. In addition, Colby is an associate editor of *Kentucky Review* and of FutureCycle Press. She lives with her husband and assorted animals on a small horse farm in Northern Illinois.

PATTY COLE is a poet who lives in Chatham County, North Carolina, on a 17-acre farm with her husband and various pets. She is published in several journals and anthologies. Her passion is capturing impressions into words. Cole is at work on her chapbook, *A Way I Sing*, which she hopes to publish in 2015.

MICHAEL COLLINS' poems have appeared numerous publications, including *Grist*, *Kenning Journal*, *Pank*, *SOFTBLOW*, and *Smartish Pace*. His first chapbook, *How to Sing when People Cut off your Head and Leave it Floating in the Water*, won the Exact Change Press Chapbook Contest in 2014. A full-length collection, *Psalmadala*, is forthcoming.

JACOB COLLINS-WILSON is the high-gain, high-fiving English high-school teacher you wish you'd had. His poetry appears in *Spillway*, *Hobart*, *Spry*, and *Split Lip*. In addition to being a finalist for the *Best of the Net 2013* anthology, he has received a residency with the Atlantic Center for the Arts. He writes reviews, too (*The Review Review* and *Heavy Feather*). Currently, Collins-Wilson is an M.F.A. candidate in poetry at Syracuse University. He can be reached by everyone at emailingjacob@gmail.com.

BARBARA CONRAD is author of *Wild Plums* (FutureCycle Press, 2013), *The Gravity of Color* (Main Street Rag, 2007), and editor of *Waiting for Soup* (2004), a collection of art and poetry from her weekly workshops with homeless neighbors in Charlotte, North Carolina. Her poems have been selected by numerous journals and anthologies, such as *Tar River Poetry*, *Sow's Ear*, *Southern Women's Review*, *Icarus*, *Kakalak*, and *Southern Poetry Anthology*. Three poems were finalists in the 2015 *North Carolina Literary Review* James Applewhite Poetry Prize. Conrad's writings, which focus on personal journey, nature and social justice issues, have won awards, honorable mentions and a Pushcart nomination.

CAROLINE COTTOM'S personal essays and poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Motif*, *Morning Glory*, *Cumberland Poetry Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *Glassworks*, *The Pen Is Mightier Than The Broom*, and *Common Boundary*. Cottom won the Transitions Abroad personal essay contest. She earned a Ph.D. in educational policy from Vanderbilt University and now teaches meditation and

leads spiritual retreats in Mexico, after living in Fiji and Ecuador for several years. During the 1980s, Cotton directed the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign and the coalition that essentially ended nuclear testing in Nevada. Her memoir, *Love Changes Things: Even In The World Of Politics*, describes this experience.

DENNIS DESMOND is an attorney living in the Washington, D.C. area with his wife and daughter. Desmond received a bachelor's degree from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a J.D. from Antioch School of Law. Desmond is a member of the Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and was a contributing author to *Pipe Dream Blues* by Clarence Lusane (South End Press, 1991). In addition to writing, Desmond's other interests include learning foreign languages and playing basketball.

DONNA L. EMERSON is a college instructor, licensed clinical social worker, photographer, and writer. Some of her publications include *CALIX*, *Eclipse*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Praxis: Gender & Cultural Critiques*, and the *South Carolina Review*. Her work has received numerous prizes and awards including the California State Poetry Society (2008) and *Naugatuck River Review* (2010). Emerson's chapbook *Body Rhymes* was nominated for a California Book Award.

TERRI KIRBY ERICKSON is the author of four collections of poetry, including *In the Palms of Angels* (Press 53, 2011), winner of a Nautilus Book Award and a Gold Medal for Poetry in the Next Generation Indie Book Awards, and her latest collection, *A Lake of Light and Clouds* (Press 53, 2014). Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Asheville Poetry Review*, *2013 Poet's Market*, *The Writer's Almanac*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *American Life in Poetry*, *Verse Daily*, and many others, and has won multiple awards and honors, including the 2014 Joy Harjo Poetry Prize, the Poetry For Their Freedom Award, and the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Prize. For more information about her life and work, please visit her website at www.terrikirbyerickson.com.

RUPERT FIKE'S collection of poems *Lotus Buffet* (Brick Road Poetry Press) was named Finalist in the 2011 Georgia Author of the Year awards. He has received Pushcart nominations in fiction and poetry, with work appearing in *Rosebud*, *The Southern Review of Poetry*, *Natural Bridge*, *A&U America's AIDS Magazine*, *The Buddhist Poetry Review*, and others. Now in its second printing, Fike's nonfiction book *Voices from The Farm* offers accounts of life on a spiritual community in Tennessee in the 1970s.

TERRY FORD is now semi retired after four decades of full-time teaching at Kent State University at Stark. During that time, Ford served as English department coordinator, spoke and presented at numerous academic conferences, was featured in campus literary publications, earned a distinguished teaching award, and was honored as a distinguished woman of the university. A longtime supporter of Ohio and Midwest writing, Ford was a perennial organizer and grant writer for the Midwest Writer's Conference. Ford enjoys reading, writing, gardening, and grandmothering. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *The Chaffin Journal*, *Corium Magazine*, *Eastere*, *Foliate Oak*, *Folly*, *Grey Sparrow*, *Meridian Anthology*, *Our Town*, *North Canton*, *The Portland Review*, *St. Ann's Review*, *Schuykill Valley Journal*, and *Viral Cat*.

SUSAN CLAIRE GLASS is a freelance writer, musician, and amateur ornithologist living in Saratoga, California. She is Associate Editor of *The Blind Californian*, a state affiliate publication of the American Council of the Blind. Her poetry has appeared in *The Snowy Egret Journal* and *Magnets and Ladders*, an online Journal of writing by and about people with disabilities. She recently retired from a full professorship at West Valley Community College, where she taught courses in composition, American literature, creative writing, and women's studies. She shares her home life with her husband John and Zeus, her black Labrador Retriever/Guide Dog.

CAROL LYNN STEVENSON GRELLAS is a six-time Pushcart nominee and twice nominated *Best of the Net* nominee. She has authored several chapbooks along with her latest full-length collection of poems *Hasty Notes in No Particular Order*, newly released from Aldrich Press. She is the 2012 winner of the Red Ochre Press Chapbook competition for her manuscript *Before I Go to Sleep*, and according to family lore, she is a direct descendent of Robert Louis Stevenson. Visit Grellas at www.clgrellaspoeetry.com.

KEVIN GRIFFIN is an English/creative writing teacher and wrestling coach at Detroit Catholic Central High School. He is most happily married to his wife, Premu, and they have two sons, Emmett and Henry. His poetry has been published or will soon appear in *Voices*, *The Garfield Lake Review*, and *The MacGuffin*. Griffin also won first prize in the Dyer-Ives Poetry Contest (judged by Billy Collins) in 2007.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON is a professor of English at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. Her first volume of poetry, *The Distance to Nightfall* (Main Street Rag Press), was published in July. Other recent publications include *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *Plainsongs*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, and *Deep South Magazine*. Hamilton's work has appeared twice previously in *Broad River Review*.

CHAD HANSON serves as Chairman of the Department of Sociology & Social Work at Casper College. His creative nonfiction titles include *Swimming with Trout* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007) and *Trout Streams of the Heart* (Truman State University Press, 2013). His collection of poems, *Patches of Light*, won the Meadowhawk Prize (Red Dragonfly Press, 2014). Visit Hanson at www.chadhanson.org.

RYAN HAVELY earned his bachelor's in English from Ohio University and his M.F.A. from Minnesota State University. He teaches English and creative writing at West Virginia University at Parkersburg. His work appears in such magazines as *The Columbia Review*, *Niche*, *New Plains Review*, *Amperсанд*, *Mobius*, and *Midwestern Gothic*.

LINDA H. HEURING is a Southern writer temporarily transplanted to Chicago. Her short stories have appeared recently in *Dos Passos Review*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *Kestrel*, *Clover: A Literary Rag*, *Concho River Review*, *2012 Fish Anthology* (Ireland), *Rosebud*, and *Southern Women's Review*. Her story "Roommates" was awarded the Fish International Short Story Prize in 2012.

ALISON HICKS' work has appeared or is forthcoming in *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, *Eclipse*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Gargoyle*, *Licking River Review*, *Louisville Review*, *OVS Magazine*, *Pearl*, *Permafrost*, *Sanskrit*, *Whiskey Island*, and other journals.

Books include a full-length collection of poems, *Kiss* (PS Books, 2011), a chapbook, *Falling Dreams* (Finishing Line Press, 2006), and a novella, *Love: A Story of Images* (AWA Press, 2004), a finalist in the 1999 *Quarterly West* Novella Competition. Awards include the 2011 *Philadelphia City Paper* Poetry Prize and two fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Hicks is founder of Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio, which offers community based writing workshops.

As editor of Many Voices Press, **LOWELL JAEGER** compiled *New Poets of the American West*, an anthology of poets from 11 Western states. He is author of five collections of poems, including *WE* (Main Street Rag Press, 2010) and *How Quickly What's Passing Goes Past* (Grayson Books, 2013). Most recently, Jaeger was awarded the Montana Governor's Humanities Award for his work in promoting thoughtful civic discourse.

ANDREW JARVIS is the author of *Sound Points* (Red Bard Press), *Ascent* (Finishing Line Press), and *The Strait* (Homebound Publications). His poems have appeared in *Evansville Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Tulane Review*, and many other magazines. He was a Finalist for the 2014 Homebound Publications Poetry Prize. He also judges poetry contests and edits anthologies for Red Dashboard LLC. Jarvis holds an M.A. in writing (poetry) from Johns Hopkins University.

LORRAINE JEFFERY earned her bachelor's degree in English and her MLIS in library science, and has managed public libraries in Texas, Ohio and Utah for over twenty years. She has won several poetry prizes in state and national contests and has published over thirty poems in various publications, including *Calliope*, *Ibbetson Street*, *July Literary Press*, and *Rockhurst Review*. Her articles have appeared in *Focus on the Family*, *Mature Years*, and *Woman's Touch*, as well as other publications. She is the mother of ten children (eight adopted) and currently lives with her husband in Orem, Utah.

ESTHER WHITMAN JOHNSON is a former high school English teacher and counselor from Southwest Virginia who now travels the globe doing volunteer gigs on five continents, often writing about her journeys. She has completed twelve international builds with Habitat for Humanity, the last in Mongolia, the next in Bolivia. She has traveled to central China on a sleeper train, voyaged to Patagonia on a freighter, ridden camels in the Gobi, and lived with an African family in a village in Madagascar. Johnson's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Main Street Rag*, *Artemis*, *Colere*, *Dirty Chai*, *Blue Lotus*, *Virginia Literary Journal*, and *Virginia Writers*.

JOSHUA JONES has lived in Virginia, Texas, North Carolina, Georgia, and now Massachusetts. He received his bachelor's degree from Houston Baptist University and is a candidate for the M.F.A. in poetry at University of Massachusetts Boston. His poems have appeared in *Dappled Things*, *The Rectangle*, *The Mayo Review*, and others. Jones lives in Dorchester with his inestimable wife Lesleigh and their dog Gumvere.

JANET JOYNER grew up in the South Carolina Low Country. Until her retirement, she was professor of French language and comparative literature at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Her short stories have appeared in the *Crescent Review* and *Flying South*, and she is a past winner of the South Carolina Poetry Society's Dubose and Dorothy Heyward Poetry Prize. Her poems

have appeared in *Main Street Rag*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *Bay Leaves* (of The NC Poetry Council), *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Emrys Journal*, *The Constock Review*, *The Journal of Kentucky Studies*, *Flying South 2014*, *MayDay Magazine*, *The North Carolina Literary Review*, and in the forthcoming North Carolina volume of *The Southern Poetry Anthology*. She is the translator of *Le Dieu désarmé* by Luc François Dumas. She lives and writes in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

TIM KEPPEL'S work has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *The Literary Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Xavier Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Best New Writing*, *Prison International*, and elsewhere. He teaches literature and writing at the Universidad del Valle in Cali, Colombia.

After earning graduate degrees from the University of North Carolina, **RICHARD LEBOVITZ** taught college and high school English before entering the career path that has led him to his current position as editorial and educational director for an Atlanta-based B2B events and digital media company. His poetry springs from his desire to seize on those fleeting moments of beauty the natural world delivers to our doorsteps and to share those experiences on an emotional level with his fellow human beings.

KATHLEEN BREWIN LEWIS is a Georgia writer who published her first chapbook, *Fluent in Rivers*, in 2014. Her work has also appeared or is forthcoming in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Heron Tree*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *James Dukey Review*, *Vermassee*, and *Still: The Journal*. Lewis has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and is senior editor of the online journal *Flycatcher*.

DAVID LOOPE works as Vice President of Academic Affairs and Professor of Humanities at Reynolds Community College in Richmond, Virginia. His poems have appeared in *Wayfarer* and *DeadMule*.

CHRISTOPHER MARTIN is an essayist, poet, and editor from the Allatoona region of northwest Georgia, where he lives with his wife and their two young children. He is author of three poetry chapbooks, most recently *Marescence* (Finishing Line Press, 2014) and *Everything Turns Away* (La Vita Poetica Press, 2014). His work has appeared in such publications as American Public Media's *On Being* blog, *Still: The Journal*, *Shambhala Sun*, *Thrush*, and *Waccanaw*, among several others. The winner of the 2014 George Scarborough Prize in Poetry, Martin is the founding editor of *Flycatcher* and a contributing editor at *New Southerner*. He has work forthcoming in the anthologies *Hard Lines: Rough South Poetry* (University of South Carolina Press) and *Stone River Sky: An Anthology of Georgia Poetry* (Negative Capability Press). You can find Martin online at www.christopher-martin.net.

STEPHEN MASSIMILLA is a critic and professor. His co-authored book, *Cooking with the Muse*, is forthcoming from Tupelo Press. His book, *The Plague Doctor in His Hull Shaped Hat*, was selected in the Stephen F. Austin State University Press Prize contest. He received the Grolier Prize for *Later on Asana*, an Academy of American Poets Prize, and multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Massimilla is published in *AGNI*, *American Literary Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Chelsea*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Epoch*, *The Literary Review*,

Paterson Literary Review, Provincetown Arts, Tampa Review, among other journals and anthologies. He holds an M.F.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University.

Born in Mobile, Alabama, **CHARLOTTE McCaffrey** moved to California after two decades in the Midwest. McCaffrey holds a bachelor's degree in English literature and education from Washington University in St. Louis. Her work has been published in an anthology of poems concerning 9/11/01 (*An Eye for an Eye Leaves the Whole World Blind* edited by Allen Cohen), and has also appeared in many literary reviews and journals, including *13th Moon, Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review, Chrysalis Reader, The Comstock Review, Confluence, Confrontation, Cumberland Poetry Review, The Distillery, Eclipse, English Journal, Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review, Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly, Iris, Limestone, The Louisville Review, MacGuffin, Madison Review, Off The Coast, Pearl, Phantasmagoria, Phoebe, The Pikeville Review, Poem, Post Lore, Poetry International, Red Wheelbarrow Literary Magazine, Reed Magazine, RiverSedge, Sojourner, Soundings East, Sulphur River Literary Review, Talking River, Weber Studies, Wisconsin Review, Women's Studies Quarterly*, and *Writers' Forum*. A former chef and special education teacher, McCaffrey currently gardens, cooks, and writes in the San Francisco Bay area.

SARAH MERROW lived in New England until 2011, and she is now a Baltimorean who loves the Southern Appalachians. She works with professional flutists and repairs their flutes, hears music in language, and words in melody. She has studied English, German, Japanese, and Spanish, and began writing poetry in fifth grade.

DARLENA MOORE'S creative work has been published in *The Rapid River Literary Digest, The Verge, Poetry Matters*, and *The Great Smokies Review*. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband, Sam, and her dogs, Zu Zu and Fig.

JED MYERS lives in Seattle. Two recent poetry collections are *The Nameless* (Finishing Line Press) and *Watching the Perseids* (Sacramento Poetry Center Book Award). He's won *Southern Indiana Review's* Editors' Award and the *Literal Latte* Award. He's had a Pushcart nomination, and, in the UK, a Forward Prize nomination. His work's appeared in *Prairie Schooner, Nimrod, I-70 Review, Crab Orchard Review, Painted Bride Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

BETTYJOYCE NASH is a journalist whose fiction has appeared in the *North Dakota Quarterly*. With the gift of time and space at residencies—The Tyrone Guthrie Center, in Ireland, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Ragdale—she is completing a novel she drafted in 2013 at The MacDowell Colony. She teaches creative writing at the Albemarle Charlottesville Regional Jail.

ALICE OSBORN'S past educational and work experience is unusually varied, and it now feeds her work as a poet, editor, and author mentor—she has helped hundreds of first-time authors write and publish their memoir, poetry and fiction. Alice is the author of three books of poetry (fourth book forthcoming in 2015) and is the editor of the Main Street Rag anthologies *Tattoos and Creatures of Habitat*. Alice lives in Raleigh with her husband, two children, and four messy birds. In her other life she's an Irish dancer and enjoys performing accompanied by her acoustic guitar. Visit Alice at www.aliceosborn.com

ADAM PADGETT'S fiction has appeared in *Appalachian Heritage*, *Big Muddy*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Additionally, his fiction has recently been reprinted in *Surreal South '13: An Anthology of Short Fiction*. Padgett is a mentor for PEN America's Prison Writing Program and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He won the 2014 Rash Award in Fiction.

ALLISON PARRISH is a senior communications major at Gardner-Webb University. Parrish has a concentration in photography, as well as minors in graphic design and journalism. From Asheville, North Carolina, Parrish will graduate in May 2015.

RICHARD KING PERKINS II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, Illinois, with his wife Vickie and daughter Sage. He is a three-time Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee whose work has appeared in hundreds of publications including *The Louisiana Review*, *Bluestem*, *Emrys Journal*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Two Thirds North*, *The Red Cedar Review*, and *The William and Mary Review*. He has poems forthcoming in the *Roanoke Review*, *The Alembic*, and *Milkfish*. His poem "Distillery of the Sun" was awarded second place in the 2014 *Bacopa Literary Review* poetry contest.

JOHN REPP'S most recent collections are *Music Over the Water* (Alice Greene & Co., 2013) and *Fat Jersey Blues* (University of Akron Press, 2014).

M.C. RUSH currently lives in upstate New York. His poems have most recently appeared in *300 Days of Sun*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Better: Culture & Lit*, *Blue Fifth Review*, and *The Chaffey Review*, and has work forthcoming in *Open Road Review*.

Born and raised in New York City, **MIA SARA** made a reluctant move to Los Angeles to facilitate her career as an actress in the film and television industry. Her acting credits include *Legend*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Tune Cop*, *Queenie*, *A Stranger Among Us*, *Jack And The Beanstalk: The Real Story*, and many others. Now, after twenty-five frenetic years, Sara has found her form at last, in poetry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Chaparral*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *poemunemotstory*, *Saint Ann's Review*, *The Southampton Review*, *The Sunnyside Review*, *The Write Room*, *Forge*, *Superstition Review*, *Helix*, *The Kit Cat Review*, *PANK*, and *Cultural Weekly*, and she contributes regularly to *PANK's* blog with her column, "Wrought and Found."

NICOLE SAXTON is a senior broadcast journalism and English double major at Gardner-Webb University. She likes to say she is a "literary artist who uses the talents gifted by God to produce art. Poetry is more than a collection of pretty words, it's my dinner, my light, my air while drowning." Saxton's work has been published previously in *Broad River Review* and by the Live Poets Society of New Jersey. Saxton won the 2014 J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award.

MAUREEN SHERBONDY'S most recent poetry books are *Beyond Fairy Tales* and *Eulogy for an Imperfect Man*. She teaches at Alamance Community College and resides in Raleigh.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG has published two books of poetry: *What Focus Is* (Word Press, 2011) and *Out of Body* (winner of the 2004 *Bluestem* Poetry Award and published in 2006 by *Bluestem Press* at Emporia State University). Spireng's

chapbooks include *Clear Cut*, a signed and numbered limited edition of his poems based on photographs by Austin Stracke, *Young Farmer, Encounters, Inspiration Point* (winner of the 2006 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition), and *Just This*. Since 1990, Spireng's poems have appeared in publications across the United States, including *Broad River Review*, *North American Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *English Journal*, and *Connecticut Review*. Spireng holds an M.A. in creative writing from Hollins College.

BRADLEY STRAHAN just returned from two years in Ireland and the low countries. He has taught poetry at Georgetown University for 12 years. Strahan was also a Fulbright Professor of Poetry & American Culture in the Balkans. He has published six books of poetry and over 600 poems in numerous journals, including *America*, *Poet Lore*, and *Hollins Critic*. Strahan's latest book, *This Art of Losing*, has had considerable critical praise and been translated into French. A book of poems about his recent stay in Ireland will be out soon.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR lives near Raleigh, North Carolina. Her poems and academic writing have appeared in journals, magazines, anthologies and online. She also leads poetry writing workshops through Duke Continuing Education. Of four chapbooks, the most recent, *High Ground*, was published by Main Street Rag in 2013.

LARRY D. THACKER is an Appalachian writer and artist. His poetry can be found in past issues of *Still: The Journal*, *The Emancipator*, *Motif 2*, *Full of Crow*, *Kudzu Literary Magazine*, *Country Grind*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, *Volume VI: Tennessee*, *Mojave River Review*, *Fried Chicken and Coffee*, *The Moon Magazine*, *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*, and *Appalachian Heritage*. He is the author of *Mountain Mysteries: The Mystic Traditions of Appalachia* and the poetry chapbook *Voice Hunting*. He serves as Associate Dean of Students at Lincoln Memorial University.

KORY WELLS grew up on the stories of her southern Appalachian family and the wonder of the Space Age, diverse influences that have shaped her life's work and writing. Author of the poetry chapbook *Heaven Was the Moon* (March Street Press), she often performs her poetry with daughter Kelsey Wells, an old-time musician. The Tennessee duo's debut album is called *Decent Pan of Cornbread*. Kory's novel-in-progress was a William Faulkner competition finalist, and her work is published or forthcoming in *Christian Science Monitor*, *Unsplendid*, *Ruminate*, *Rock & Sling*, *Now & Then*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, and other publications.

HELEN WICKES lives in Oakland, California, and worked for many years as a psychotherapist. In 2002, she received an M.F.A. from Bennington College. Her first book of poems, *In Search of Landscape*, was published in 2007 by Sixteen Rivers Press. Her poems can be read and heard online at *From The Fishhouse*. In addition, Wickes' work has appeared or is forthcoming in *AGNI Online*, *Arroyo Literary Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *California Quarterly*, *The Citron Review*, *Confrontation*, *Evansville Review*, *gnosko*, *RiverSedge*, *Sakura Review*, *Sanskrit*, *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Stand*, *Talking River*, *TriQuarterly*, *Runes*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Zone 3*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *The Journal*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Limestone*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Cloudbank*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Willow Review*, *Boulevard*,

Soundings East, *The Coe Review*, *Concho River Review*, *Crucible*, *The Jabberwock Review*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Pleiades*, *The Griffin*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Salamander*, *Weber: The Contemporary West*, *5 AM*, the *Bennington Review*, *Picayune Magazine*, *The Tower Journal*, and the anthology *Best of the Web 2009*

HAROLD WHIT WILLIAMS was a featured poet in the 2014 University of North Texas Kraken Reading Series, as well as winner of the 2014 *Mississippi Review* Poetry Prize. His newest collection, *Backmasking*, is winner of the 2013 Robert Phillips Poetry Chapbook Prize from Texas Review Press. In his spare time, Williams is guitarist for the critically acclaimed rock band Cotton Mather.

HOWARD WINN'S fiction and poetry has been published by such journals as *Dalhousie Review*, *Galway Review* (Ireland), *Descant* (Canada), *BlueLine*, *Evansville Review*, *Antigonish Review*, *Strange Frequencies*, *Squawk Back*, *Break The Spine*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Borderlands*, and *Xavier Review*. Winn holds a bachelor's from Vassar College, an M.A. in creative writing from Stanford University, and has additional graduate work at the University of California San Francisco and doctoral work at N.Y.U.. Winn has been a social worker in California and is currently a professor of English of SUNY.

FRANCINE WITTE lives in New York City. She received her M.A. from SUNY Binghamton and her M.F.A. from Vermont College. Witte's flash fiction chapbook, *The Wind Twirls Everything*, was published by MuscleHead Press. She is the winner of the Thomas A. Wilhelmus Award in fiction from Ropewalk Press, and her chapbook *Cold June* was published in 2010. Additional poetry chapbooks include *First Rain* (Pecan Grove Press, 2009) and *Only, Not Only* (Finishing Line Press). Witte is a high school English teacher.

JANE WOODS currently works at Gardner-Webb University, cooks in her free time, and dreams about becoming a full-time farmer. A past winner of the J. Calvin Koons Poetry Award, her poems have been published once before in the *Broad River Review*.

BARRY YEOMAN was educated at Bowling Green State University, The University of Cincinnati, and The McGregor School of Antioch University, in creative writing, world classics, and the humanities. He is originally from Springfield, Ohio, and currently lives in London, Ohio. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Red Booth Review*, *Futures Trading*, *Danse Macabre*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Red Fez*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, *Crack the Spine*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Soundings Review*, and *The Rusty Nail*, among others. You can read more of his published work at www.redfez.net/member/1168/bookshelf.

LAURA A. ZINK lives in Oakland, California, and teaches English literature and composition at Berkeley City College. She earned her bachelor's in English literature from Mills College and her M.A. in English from the University of Minnesota Duluth.